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**HOW TO BE AN AMERICAN:
COMMUNITY ANTICOMMUNISM AND THE GRASSROOTS RIGHT,
1948-1956**

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PhD in American Studies

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January 2013

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

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PhD in American Studies

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SUMMARY

This thesis explores the political and cultural impact of community-level conservative activists during the early Cold War red scare in America. It provides a comprehensive overview of a hitherto overlooked aspect of the so-called McCarthy-era — amateur counter-subversives who contributed to the national mood of anticommunism in obscure but meaningful ways. It also establishes significant philosophical and practical connections between disparate groups — some nakedly right-wing, others more vaguely "patriotic" — that demonstrate the existence of a loose but genuine grassroots anticommunist network. In the broader historical sense, by contextualizing the achievements of this embryonic conservative movement, this thesis builds upon and challenges the body of literature that posits the 1960s as the essential decade in the emergence of the modern, socially conservative Republican right.

In the last years of the 1940s, factions within the political and legal establishment used red scare rhetoric and new loyalty regulations to visit brief

but potent misery upon their liberal and leftist enemies. At the same time, less well-connected Americans signed up for the ideological struggle. Some were members of influential civic organizations — such as the American Legion — whose long-held enmity towards left-wing politics found fresh urgency in the Cold War age; Others joined newly formed pressure groups with the expressed aim of defending their towns and suburbs from Soviet-inspired subversion. Veterans groups, school board campaigns, religious bodies, and women's patriotic societies: all provided forums for local-level attacks on perceived un-Americanism. This thesis utilizes the literature, letters and ephemera of such organizations, as well as local newspaper reports, legal and political investigations, and the personal recollections of activists, to document and analyze the most significant actions carried out in the name of community anticommunism. It examines how grassroots campaigners worked to reshape what it meant to be American, and finds ways in which their efforts — scorned as absurdly reactionary by contemporary observers — pointed towards a shifting American political landscape.

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Introduction

For over a decade following the end of World War Two, as the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union deteriorated from allies against Nazism to entrenched Cold War enemies, the American political and cultural establishment was gripped by a fever of anticommunism. This “red scare” took the shape of congressional investigations into alleged State Department treachery, loyalty oaths for government employees, blacklists in the entertainment industry and purges of suspect academics. Its protagonists came from the political and legal classes — the red-hunting “G-men” of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, lawmakers who passed ever more wide-ranging anti-sedition measures, ambitious politicians who made names for themselves on the House Committee on Un-American Activities and likeminded bodies. Its most prominent victims were also often representative of relatively privileged social strata, at least until their patriotism was called into question.

The red scare that shook the upper echelons of US society from the late 1940s to the mid-1950s has fascinated academics and the general public alike, representing arguably the defining cultural phenomenon of the era in the popular mind, and, indeed, one of the most enduring and notorious political moments of the American century. Its terminology — McCarthyism, witch-hunts, red-baiting, naming names — has passed into general use, by-words for a

strange age of distrust, repression and spite: a “Nightmare Decade”, as the title of one scholarly history has it.¹

But another version of the red scare emerged, albeit more quietly, during the early Cold War: one that found a home in the front rooms, churches and community forums of ordinary America. This took more esoteric forms. On 1 May 1950, in the tiny central Wisconsin community of Mosinee, citizens staged an elaborate “communist takeover” in order to demonstrate the horrors of life in a future United Soviet States. Local war veterans bearing unloaded rifles “seized” the library, school and paper mill and “liquidated” employees to a work camp on the edge of town. The main street cinema was “nationalized” and renamed the People’s Theater; cafeterias ramped up prices to extortionate levels while townsfolk queued good-naturedly for black bread and potato soup. Two members of the so-called “professional anticommunist” network — ex-reds Benjamin Gitlow and Joseph Kornfeder — stepped in as commissars for the newly formed and short-lived Moscow satellite. At sundown the townsfolk burned their red flags, bade farewell to a coterie of forty newspaper reporters, and returned to lives of all-American obscurity. In Houston, Texas, that same year, an amateur anticommunist overheard a radio producer discussing Chinese history with the owner of the Chinese restaurant in which he was having dinner. The quick-witted eavesdropper left the establishment and immediately informed the police of this suspiciously red-tinged encounter: as a result of his vigilance, the radio producer and her dinner partner spent fourteen hours in jail before

¹ Fred Cook, *The Nightmare Decade: The Life and Times of Senator Joe McCarthy* (New York: Random House, 1971).

being released without charge. In towns and cities across the nation, anticommunist groups and individuals fought their own little Cold Wars against perceived un-Americanism: others expressed their unease more subtly, worrying to themselves, as did one New York housewife, about a young acquaintance who “never associated with people his own age”, and who “had a foreign camera and took so many pictures of the large New York bridges”.²

This second version of the red scare, representing the anticommunism of the American community, is significantly less well documented than the first. The willing participants on the Cold War home front are recognized in a popular narrative of suspicion, innate conservatism and “hysteria” over exaggerated dangers of communist infiltration. But in terms of a scholarly investigation into the scope and character of the grassroots response to national fears, they are almost entirely absent. As Michael Kazin observed in his essay on “The Grass-Roots Right”, “We know that millions of Americans marched in Loyalty Day demonstrations, prayed regularly for the ‘conversion’ of Russia, idolized General MacArthur after President Truman took away his command, and participated in Red-hunting activities sponsored by groups like the American Legion and the John Birch Society [but] we do not know, with any degree of precision, who these mobilizers and followers were.” This thesis bridges the knowledge gap.³

² Unidentified magazine clipping, 15 May 1950, Folder 9-773, Box 5, American Business Consultants, Inc. *Counterattack*: Research Files, Tamiment Library/Wagner Archives, Elmer Holmes Bobst Library, New York University, New York; *New York Times*, 2 May 1950; Douglas T. Miller and Marion Nowak, *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1977), p.21; Samuel A. Stouffer, *Communism, Conformity and Civil Liberties: A Cross-Section of the Nation Speaks Its Mind* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1992), p.178.

³ Michael Kazin, “The Grass-Roots Right: New Histories of U.S. Conservatism in the Twentieth Century”, *American Historical Review*, Vol. 97, No. 1, February 1992, p.146.

Once the dust settled on the upheavals of early Cold War anticommunism, a broad and lasting consensus emerged on the appropriate model for studying the era. As Ellen Schrecker, one of the leading red scare historians puts it, “McCarthyism was primarily a top-down phenomenon”. Individual actors, such as the eponymous Wisconsin senator, drove, and profited from, the “hysteria”, but red-baiting flourished primarily thanks to systemic indulgence across a broad swathe of the American ruling class. This “top-down” framework was not the first serious attempt to contextualize the domestic political intrigues of the late forties and early fifties, however. Immediately following the peak years of organized anticommunism, a group of scholars had offered a radically different hypothesis: that McCarthyism was, at heart, a mass popular revolt against a moderate liberal establishment. With this analysis, self-identified centrist intellectuals like Daniel Bell, Richard Hofstadter and Seymour Lipset sought to diminish elite culpability in the red scare and identify its architects according to their own prejudices — “suspicion of the people, fear of radicalism, friendliness to established institutions,” as Michael Rogin characterizes them.⁴

In proposing an alternative, bottom-up model for understanding the red scare, this thesis does not reject the framework endorsed by Schrecker, Rogin and the bulk of post-1960 scholars, and certainly does not attempt to revive the flawed “populist revolt” theory of the late fifties. Rather, it contributes to a more complete understanding of America’s domestic response to the early Cold War, by illuminating those community activists who most enthusiastically embraced

⁴ Ellen Schrecker, *Many are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p.xv; Michael Paul Rogin, *The Intellectuals and McCarthy: The Radical Specter* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1967), p.7.

the national spirit of suspicion and repression. They were not the catalyst for McCarthyism, but they did respond to it in vivid and meaningful ways. By returning to the question of the red scare's popular base, this thesis builds upon recent Cold War scholarship that has increasingly explored a more expansive interpretation of McCarthy era counter-subversion. Michael Heale has shown how federal loyalty investigations and purges were replicated and adapted on a state-by-state basis. This thesis shares his more localized focus in its study of non-governmental factions. Richard M. Fried has examined Cold War pageantry and patriotic performance — often an essential component of the highly demonstrative Americanism employed by the grassroots activists covered in this thesis. Other recent attempts to open out the definition of the McCarthyist age include Mary C. Brennan and Michelle Nickerson's work on anticommunist women: this thesis shares those scholars' belief in the important role played by gendered language, performance and politics during the red scare.⁵

In critiquing the successes and failures of Cold War community mobilization, this thesis also situates grassroots anticommunism within a wider narrative of evolving popular conservatism. Scholars such as Lisa McGirr, Darren Dochuk, Kurt Schuparra, Matthew Lassiter and Kevin Kruse have insightfully located elements of the right's post-1980 dominance of the Republican Party in the shifting gender, racial, class and religious concerns of ordinary Americans in the

⁵ Recent works taking a broader view of McCarthyism include: M. J. Heale, *McCarthy's Americans: Red Scare Politics in State and Nation, 1935-1965* (Basingstoke, UK: MacMillan Press, 1998); Mary C. Brennan, *Wives, Mothers, and the Red Menace: Conservative Women and the Crusade Against Communism* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2008); Richard M. Fried, *The Russians Are Coming! The Russians Are Coming!* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Richard Gid Powers, *Not Without Honor: The History of American Anticommunism*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); M. J. Heale, *American Anticommunism: Combating the Enemy Within 1830-1970* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

1960s and 1970s — particularly those who lived in the newly sprawling suburbs of major sunbelt cities like Los Angeles and Atlanta. However, as fruitful and revealing as this trend has been, Lisa McGirr points out that, “We have few studies that chart the popular base of McCarthyism, uncovering who the mobilizers and followers were, and their continuities and discontinuities with earlier generations of conservative activists”. This thesis provides a link between the work of McGirr, Kruse and others, and the traditionally distinct field of red scare history. Despite contemporary liberal fears of burgeoning fascism there was no appetite for a hard right capture of power during the McCarthy era, no real structure for translating the headline-grabbing actions of red-baiting politicians into a nationwide electoral base. But grassroots anticommunism provides us with a vision of what such a movement could have looked like. Rooted in the anxieties of a changing society, and adept at connecting Republican economic goals to a more universalist rhetoric, it is a vision mirrored in future waves of right-wing organizing.⁶

Chapter one of this thesis presents a case study of the single most striking moment of popular counter-subversive activity of the entire early Cold War: the 1949 anticommunist riots in Peekskill, New York. It examines the background, causes and events of these two violent mass protests and contends that they

⁶ Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p.280; For examples of the thriving field of post-war American right studies see also: John A. Andrew III, *The Other Side of the Sixties: Young Americans for Freedom and the Rise of Conservative Politics* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997); Dan Carter, *Politics of Rage: George Wallace, The Origins of Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995); Kurt Schuparra, *Triumph Of The Right: The Rise Of The California Conservative Movement, 1945-1966* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1998); Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2011).

should be understood as a meaningful, if problematic, part of the wider Cold War narrative. It addresses the role of local anticommunist activists in the disturbances — specifically, organized war veterans — and explores the legacy of this vivid, but isolated, episode. Chapter two builds on the previous one by examining the role of veterans in advocating and enacting counter-subversive organizing on a national scale. It looks at the official-level politics of mass-membership bodies like the American Legion, and the ways in which these policies translated to more spontaneous, local-level action. Chapter three addresses the role of religion in building a new kind of conservative politics around the domestic communist issue. Protestant and Catholic responses are scrutinized, with a particular emphasis on the Southern California-based Freedom Clubs. The chapter looks at the impact of this spiritual anticommunism on the American church, and asks to what extent the red scare pointed the way for an emerging Christian right. Chapter four investigates the gender dynamics of community anticommunist activism, exploring the actions of women-only or female-centric patriotic groups and the ways in which they responded to the gendered space of the Cold War home front. Finally, the fifth chapter looks at a specific field with which conservative grassroots anticommunism was particularly concerned: education. It explains how the red scare provided a backdrop for right-wing parents and community members to fight against perceived progressivism and liberal activism in the classroom.

As this outline illustrates, grassroots anticommunists were a diverse, disparate constituency. They ranged from newly formed conservative pressure groups with relatively fringe ideologies and limited support bases, to long established

social organizations like the Legion, with vast memberships and a seemingly more moderate patriotic line. Some spoke in grand terms of the battle for America's soul; others concerned themselves with ultra-localized issues, using Cold War fears as polemical proxies for concrete community concerns. Nevertheless, this thesis demonstrates there was considerable coherence in the aims and actions of these amateur counter-subversives.

Almost exclusively, they portrayed their activism as a defensive measure, respondent to the Soviet menace and motivated by loyalty to American values. "Non-partisan" was a widely claimed badge of honour. It was also, as this thesis makes clear, a meaningless boast. Not only did anticommunists advocate a hard-line, uncompromising definition of leftist subversion shared by conservative politicians like Richard Nixon, Joseph McCarthy and William Knowland, but they also frequently adopted right-wing ideological positions only vaguely related to domestic security. While some anticommunist groups were more openly political than others, this thesis demonstrates a thread of both personnel and policy running throughout the broad counter-subversive network. Many activists aspired to participation in a united front against communism, and there were several flawed attempts to create such a body.

This thesis, then, shows that grassroots anticommunists were a genuine political faction — "Never really a mass movement", to use Robert Griffith's formulation, but a widespread network with a shared vision for American society that went further than simply ridding it of communists and tolerance of communism. Beyond establishing this embryonic coalition's existence, the research here also

reveals important information about the types of people who signed up for the crusade. While conservative boosters like George Sokolsky revered them as homespun patriots, preaching “old cracker barrel” wisdom, the contemporary liberal reaction was a mixture of mockery, fear and contempt towards dangerous bigots. McCarthy biographer Richard Rovere described conservative activists as “moon-struck souls” as well as “zanies and zombies and compulsive haters”. Others derided them as vigilantes, reactionaries and cranks, often conflating the bulk of conservative anticommunist activists with an anti-Semitic fringe-within-a-fringe. While it is certainly true that old slanders about Jewish communist cabals found fresh currency in the world of McCarthy-era letter-writers and pamphleteers, outside the South overtly racist and anti-Semitic groups had little material impact on the red scare. This thesis explores how the lines between sectarianism and patriotism were sometimes blurry, but finds that the most active campaigners carefully eschewed explicit declarations of prejudice as they laid claim to mainstream, Americanist ideals.⁷

Slightly more scientifically than Rovere but in a similar vein, scholars like Hofstadter and Lipset argued that popular support for red scare repression came not from traditionally conservative factions but from alternative constituencies of angry, frightened Americans engaged in a “pseudo-Conservative revolt”. It was a “revolt”, they explained, in that it represented a dramatic break from the liberal consensus of the previous two decades, and “pseudo-Conservative” in that, while indulging in patriotic, anti-left expression which superficially resembled that of

⁷ Robert Griffith, *The Politics of Fear: Joseph McCarthy and the Senate*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), p.xi; Richard Rovere, *Senator Joe McCarthy* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1960), p.21 and p.72; *Portsmouth Times*, 31 May 1952, p.6.

the established right, its proponents did not want to preserve traditional American institutions and values but rather to overhaul them. Such radical tendencies were explained in quasi-psychological terms. Peter Viereck, for example, identified Cold War anticommunism as jealous, anti-elitist fury, “the revenge of those noses that for twenty years of fancy parties were pressed against the outside window pane”. Samuel Stouffer, a Harvard sociologist who produced a significant 1954 work surveying American attitudes to communist fears and the red scare, suggested that the least educated, least cosmopolitan and least economically advantaged sections of society were also the least tolerant of supposedly un-American political ideals.⁸

By contrast, this thesis sees little evidence of reflexive authoritarianism or anti-elitist rage in the grassroots struggles. It demonstrates, in fact, that the most active amateur anticommunists were educated, middle-class Americans. They were civically and politically engaged, with the free time and means to absorb themselves in a fairly complex and arcane political issue. Certainly they largely operated outside of existing party structures, portraying themselves as either apolitical patriots, or pragmatic “third way” upstarts tired of both Democratic and Republican ineffectiveness on key issues. But the most ardent campaigners followed an essentially Republican ideological code, one favouring small government, low taxes, and traditional moral and social ideals. They admired anticommunist politicians from the right wing of the GOP, like McCarthy and Knowland, and these establishment figures rewarded them with speeches and

⁸ Richard Hofstadter, “The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt”, in Daniel Bell ed., *The Radical Right: The New American Right, Expanded and Updated* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1963), pp.63-81; Peter Viereck, “The Revolt Against the Elite”, in *Ibid.*, pp.135-155; Stouffer, *Communism, Conformity and Civil Liberties*, pp.109-131.

endorsements. Unlike future generations of grassroots conservatives, however, the Republican establishment did not embrace the community counter-subversives, nor did they allow them to significantly shift the balance of power within the party.⁹

This thesis ultimately finds the principal motivations of grassroots anticommunists to lie somewhere between the “hysteria” of popular cliché and the calculating cynicism some have ascribed to red-baiting politicians. Like most Americans, they were genuinely concerned about Cold War threats, and susceptible to trumped-up talk of domestic insurgency. After all, the spectre of the Soviet menace was a real source of fear, even if historians now unanimously agree the threat was massively overstated. But frequently they utilized popular anxieties over un-Americanism to push hard for a concrete idea of what they thought America should be.

Grassroots anticommunists were mostly white Christians. They were socially as well as politically conservative. They lived all over the country, from remote little Mosinee to the swelling suburbs of Los Angeles. This thesis focuses on two of the most active areas of counter-subversive mobilization: Southern California and the broader New York metropolitan area. The reasons for this narrowing of focus are partly practical. These two high-density populations with significant activist bases offer the greatest opportunity for presenting a cohesive study. It is harder

⁹ Early Cold War anticommunism had a mixed impact on electoral politics, but its potency was largely as a campaigning tactic, and means of shifting the parameters of debate, rather than as a galvanizing force for long-term popular support. Neither McCarthy nor any of the other party political red-baiters emerged as a movement leader; nor did the grassroots network produce its own mainstream elected officials. Campaigns for office by community counter-subversives were conducted as outsider figures or third-party candidates. They were uniformly unsuccessful.

to extrapolate meaningful trends from the hundreds of more isolated incidents of red scare activism that occurred elsewhere across America. More than their sheer size, this thesis argues that the confluence of two factors made New York and Los Angeles particularly potent venues for community counter-subversion: the existence of prosperous, conservative towns and suburbs, and the presence of a plausible antagonist. There were only twenty thousand registered Communist Party members in the USA by the mid-fifties, ten thousand of whom lived in New York City and another two thousand in Los Angeles. By contrast, the entire South was home to barely three hundred communists in total. In some of the case studies here, such as at Peekskill, there was direct confrontation between grassroots activists and actual left-wing radicals; more often the enemy was a liberal group who opposed the methods of grassroots anticommunism. But all the communities discussed here were far closer to the domestic Cold War's symbolic front lines than were the majority of American towns.¹⁰

Both areas also had significant populations of economically advantaged, civically active right-wingers, although their respective roles in the evolution of post-war American conservatism were very different. While New York City itself was solidly Democratic, mid-century New York State was a bastion of traditional, moderate Republicanism. Its governor, Thomas Dewey, fought and lost the 1948 presidential election as a proud advocate of the North-Eastern business elites. Neighbouring Connecticut and New Jersey leant similarly centre-right. Areas such as Westchester County and Connecticut's Gold Coast were particular

¹⁰ Communist Party membership by state as of 31 December 1955, from FBI-NYC Field File 100-80638, #1008, FBI Files and Documents Pertaining to Extreme Right Individuals, Groups, and their Assertions, available at <https://sites.google.com/site/ernie124102/cpusa>.

Republican strongholds, and fertile spaces for anticommunist mobilization: pockets of privilege and tradition only a short commuter train ride from the cosmopolitan liberal wastelands of Manhattan.

If greater New York represented the heartlands of the old GOP — fiscally conservative and socially moderate — greater Los Angeles, by contrast, is seen by many scholars as the cradle of the modern American right. Prosperous, suburban, religious, socially conservative: Lisa McGirr and Kurt Schuparra, in particular, make the case for the southern Californian metropolis's essential role in building a new Republican base during in the 1960s and 1970s. This thesis demonstrates that a lesser, but still compelling, mobilization occurred in the red scare era. Numerous right-wing Californian Republicans elevated their profiles with aggressively anticommunist stances during the early Cold War, including senators Knowland and Nixon, congressmen Thomas Werdel and Donald Jackson, and state senators Jack Tenney and Nelson Dilworth. At the same time, grassroots organizations such as the Liberty Belles, Freedom Clubs, and the school board activists of Los Angeles and Pasadena rallied suburban Southlanders with red scare rhetoric. While their efforts failed to resonate like those of Reagan supporters in the 1970s, this thesis see significant similarities and indications of future developments amid the nascent grassroots right of the early Cold War.

With the concentration on the coastal metropolises, significant omissions are inevitably made. Historians including Don Carleton and George Lewis have, for instance, documented noteworthy local-level red-baiting in the southern states.

However, as Lewis' work demonstrates, southern anticommunism functioned largely as a tool in the battle against desegregation. Counter-subversive rhetoric certainly shaped a populist conservative movement in the South, with anti-civil rights activists wielding it as an effective weapon against would-be reformers, but it did not enable white resistance. The cases in this study equally responded to broad concerns, but it is difficult to imagine grassroots activism in Los Angeles and New York emerging in anything like the same form without the Cold War to inspire and justify it. For example, the violence at Peekskill grew out of longstanding conservative resentment towards local left-wing communities, but it was only the red scare identification of Paul Robeson and his concert sponsors as a security risk that tipped the scales in favour of popular protest.

The language of the American domestic Cold War is fraught with loaded terms — red baiting, witch-hunts, hysteria and so on. To avoid the traps of ideological bias, a few rules have been observed. Thus, generally, this thesis uses the terms “anticommunist” and “counter-subversive” to refer to the actions of the Cold War conservative activists it documents. In some cases, these descriptions seem inappropriate: community campaigners rarely encountered actual, active communists — more often their targets were former communists, those deemed sympathetic to communists, or simply people who appeared insufficiently *anticommunist*. “Subversive”, too, is a hugely subjective label, one that even most admitted Marxists would have rejected during the Cold War. Nevertheless, the terms seem the most useful ones available, both in the interests of consistency and for the sake of examining events through the eyes of the protagonists. Most activists did not see themselves as “red baiters” or “McCarthyists”, with all the

political opportunism that implies, but as patriots genuinely engaged in fighting a communist menace. Additionally, the phrases “anticommunist” and “counter-subversive” are helpful as a means of demarcating a continuum within grassroots right-wing ideology. Fighting Stalin’s emissaries in America may not always have been cited as the specific motivation for opposing “progressive” educational methods or United Nations-inspired “world federalism”, but these campaigns were also conducted by committed Cold Warriors, with the notion of “Americanist” conservatism versus “un-American” liberalism and leftism ever lurking in the background.

Grassroots politics is another contentious concept, particularly in modern political discourse. It has even spawned a disparaging derivative: “astroturfing,” as in an “artificial” grassroots campaign, designed to appear spontaneous and community-based but in fact orchestrated by established political forces. McGirr characterizes the grassroots in terms of physical and psychic distance from the traditional spheres of financial and legislative power: her subjects were “kitchen table activists”, with views, at least initially, that were “far outside the boundaries of acceptable politics”. Kazin talks of “insurgencies of ordinary Americans”, invoking a populist sense of the economic, cultural and educational mainstream in conflict with a privileged, influential metropolitan elite.¹¹

The activism examined in this thesis stood outside the federally sanctioned anticommunism of HUAC and the FBI, and, to a degree, was spontaneous and responsive to the motivations and concerns of “rank-and-file” Americans rather

¹¹ McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, pp.4-8; Kazin, “The Grass-Roots Right”, p.137.

than the directives of the ruling classes. Yet it cannot be described as truly grassroots without significant caveats. Community anticommunism did not function, and probably could not have functioned, without considerable input from the broader Cold War network. While it was enacted by, and impacted upon, ordinary citizens, it aspired to participation in an establishment-mandated endeavour; it saw itself as loyalist and authoritarian, rather than a radical challenge to the status quo. It drew on a spirit of patriotic anti-radicalism that had infiltrated much of American public life, from organized labour to the entertainment industry. Moreover, it responded to specific directives from various elements of the national power structure: the FBI, politicians, the national media, and independent authorities all offered encouragement to community activists, and published guides for effective action. It would be misleading, therefore, to begin a bottom up study of red scare anticommunism without first acknowledging the top down pressures applied on the grassroots.

At a basic level, grassroots anticommunism was just one manifestation of a society-wide fixation. Democratic and Republican administrations took steps to establish both the ideological imperative and legal framework for an all-out assault on disloyalty during the early Cold War. Opinions differed on the strength and scope of the necessary counter-subversion, but the idea of the anti-Soviet struggle as an all-encompassing domestic political issue was broadly endorsed by the legal, cultural and economic elites. Authority figures made clear that it was not just America the country but the “American way of life” — as in a specific and assumed ideological consensus — that was at risk. The general public, by a great majority, accepted these essential Cold War values. Ninety-five

per cent of those surveyed by Stouffer in 1954 did not believe an admitted communist could also be considered a loyal American, or safely be allowed to teach in a high-school, while as many as fifty per cent favoured suppression of even general left-wing views. At the same time, however, only a tiny minority (one or two per cent, depending on how firmly they were pushed) volunteered the red issue as a primary problem concerning their day-to-day lives. Indeed, as this research shows, the so-called “hysteria” of the red scare was in fact a somewhat abstract fear for most Americans, while clear engagement with the Soviet-inspired foe — either intellectually or practically — was the domain of only an activist fringe.¹²

Partly this stemmed from the ideological and practical complexities of amateur anticommunism. Organizing to investigate neighbours and stamp out political unorthodoxy at a community level was not an inevitable reaction to a general atmosphere of patriotism and worry; it was a political calculation and responded to complex stimuli. Dedicated boosters in influential positions were key in fostering grassroots engagement. Perhaps the greatest of these was FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, an anticommunist authority respected by all red scare activists.

¹² Liberal Democratic president Harry Truman, over the space of a few weeks in early 1947, provided both the ideological basis for an all-out war on communism — via the establishment of the Truman Doctrine — and the legal precedent for its pursuit on the home front — through the creation of a loyalty-security programme for federal employees. Eisenhower tightened the federal loyalty restrictions with his own executive order shortly after taking office. Even the Roosevelt administration handed down a legal and political legacy that provided essential groundwork for Cold War red hunting: the 1940 Smith Act, which criminalized the act of simply advocating revolutionary upheaval; the same year’s Voorhis Act, which aided the assault on American communism as a “foreign” conspiracy; and HUAC in 1938; Stouffer, *Communism, Conformity and Civil Liberties*, p.59 and p.181; In just one illustration of the disconnection between counter-subversive thought and deed, sixty-three per cent of Stouffer’s respondents favoured the firing of a communist radio singer, while only thirty-six per cent claimed they would support a boycott of a product advertised on the performer’s show — with actual participation in such an action likely to be even lower.

Throughout the early Cold War, Hoover gave loud but qualified encouragement to aspiring counter-subversives. In the late 1940s he spoke to the Belgian-born aristocrat and sculptor Suzanne Silvercruys Stevenson at a state banquet. She asked what steps ordinary citizens might take to secure the home front from infiltration. Hoover spelled out his ideas for a community-based group, one that educated Americans as to the dangers of communist ideas and tactics, galvanized them to seek out and expose subversive elements within their towns and institutions, and promoted patriotism and loyalty to the American Constitution as a corrective to national woes. Stevenson listened and, when she returned to her home in southern Connecticut, set about recruiting like-minded women to put Hoover's ideas into action. This is the story she told, anyway, as founder of the Minute Women of the USA, Inc.: a national anticommunist group that achieved brief renown as one of the loudest of a chorus of voices bringing the Cold War into the very heart of the American community.¹³

Patriots without such direct access to the private thoughts of the country's leading anti-radical authorities were able to absorb a similar vision of grassroots engagement via Hoover's 1947 *Newsweek* article "How to Stop Communism". While not explicitly advocating community counter-subversive groups, he made a clear case for a Cold War home front, on local lines, and instructed citizens to be on the look out for disloyalty. "If there were to be a slogan in the fight against Communism it should convey the thought: Uncover, expose, and spotlight their activities," he wrote. "Once this is done, the American people will do the rest —

¹³ Ellen McClay, *In The Presence of Our Enemies: A History of the Malignant Effects in American Schools of the UN's Unesco and Its Tranformation of American Society From The Lips of Those Who Did It* [sic] (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2008), p.652.

quarantine them from effectively weakening our country". By 1950, however, Hoover was clarifying his position in a statement on internal security. Amateur anticommunists should report any suspicious activity to the FBI but not draw their own conclusions about what they had seen, he explained. They should not attempt their own investigations. Sounding more like a liberal critic of McCarthyism than a famous red-hunter he also warned that "[h]ysteria, witch-hunts and vigilantes weaken our national security". A decade later, Hoover seemed to have completely lost patience with the community counter-subversive network, writing to the Attorney General to complain of "vigilante-type individuals and organizations springing up throughout the country which tend to depart from fact and use gossip, hearsay, and unsubstantiated charges in fighting communism".¹⁴

Hoover's varying public and private pronouncements illustrate the problematic relationship between grassroots campaigners and anticommunist elites. Though community activists saw themselves as loyal defenders of the homeland, often their actions looked too much like extra-legal extremism in the eyes of mainstream America. Establishment boosters thus wrestled with the dilemma of unleashing vigilantism or radical tendencies in community campaigners, even while they attempted to foment widespread grassroots support for anti-radical repression. Among these boosters were respectable and influential organizations like the American Bar Association, the American Medical Association and the

¹⁴ J. Edgar Hoover, "How to Fight Communism", in Sharon M. Hanes and Richard C. Hanes, *Cold War Primary Sources* (Farmington Hills: Gale Group, 2004), p.127; Statement on Internal Security by J. Edgar Hoover, FBI HQ File 94-1-17998, #1001, FBI Files and Documents; Memo from J. Edgar Hoover to the Attorney General captioned "The John Birch Society", 5 April 1961, FBI HQ file 62-104401, #990, Ibid.

National Association of Manufacturers [NAM]. Nominally non-partisan, these professional bodies involved themselves heavily in red scare politics, and followed a line that differed little from that of overtly rightist pressure groups. None were more enthusiastic proponents of grassroots action than the US Chamber of Commerce.

From its 1912 inception as a general industry lobbying organization, the Chamber had pushed for right-wing positions on taxes and labour rights, and it strongly opposed the New Deal's economic and welfare reforms. The group's move to involve itself actively in domestic anticommunism, while predictable, was inspired partly by a post-war wave of labour unrest. In December 1945, its board of directors proposed a nationwide publicity programme warning Americans of "the menace of Socialism in Europe, and its effect upon this country". Francis Matthews, a wealthy insurance executive and former chief of the Catholic fraternal organization Knights of Columbus, was appointed to lead this new propaganda committee, along with Emerson Schmidt, the head of the Chamber's economic research department. A letter to Matthews from a fellow director gave an indication of the level of sanguinity with which the business lobbyists were responding to the twin threats of industrial upheaval and communist infiltration. "We will have to set up some firing squads in every good sized city and town in the country," the correspondent suggested. Matthews himself, notwithstanding his long-time Democratic Party activism and future role

in the Truman administration, was an open and vigorous advocate of pre-emptive war against the USSR.¹⁵

In early 1948 Matthews and Schmidt published a fifty-page manual titled *A Program for Community Anti-Communist Action*. The tract argued that existing structures like the State Department, FBI and HUAC were inadequate to defend the Cold War home front. Only newly formed counter-subversive cells, committed to educating themselves and their local communities, and motivating their fellow citizens to demand hard-line measures on a national scale, could truly protect the homeland. Grassroots red-hunting groups were “the eyes of the community”, *A Program* explained. They should maintain files on known subversive figures, host forums and present awards to members who were deemed to have performed “outstanding patriotic work”. More direct actions were also encouraged, such as the investigation of neighbourhood librarians and schoolteachers.¹⁶

Beyond enlisting ordinary Americans as Cold War foot soldiers, *A Program* helped define the parameters of legitimate anticommunist authority. Former FBI agents, for instance, were considered appropriate local-level educators, while the American Legion could be mined for further recommendations. Openly political

¹⁵ Peter H. Irons, “American Business and the Origins of McCarthyism: The Cold War Crusade of the United States Chamber of Commerce”, in Robert Griffiths and Athan Theoharis ed., *The Specter: Original Essays on the Cold War and the Origins of McCarthyism* (New York: Franklin Watts, Inc., 1974), pp.78-79; Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p.6.

¹⁶ Irons, “American Business and the Origins McCarthyism”, Griffith and Theoharis ed., *The Specter*, p.80; *A Program for Community Anti-Communist Action* (Washington, DC: Chamber of Commerce of the United States, 1948), p.6 and p.29; *A Program* was the fourth original text in the Chamber’s anticommunist series, following investigations into infiltration in the nation as a whole, the labour movement, and the American government (a short digest of the first three texts was also printed).

publications like the ultra-conservative periodicals *National Republic* and *Counterattack* were also endorsed as suitable sources of inspiration and information. At the same time, the Chamber's guidebook warned of "self-styled experts" who peddled anti-Semitic or anti-labour lines. Instructively, it also included a longer, more detailed caution against inviting speakers who suggested that eliminating poverty or racism might be a corrective against radical left organizing — effectively banishing liberal anticommunism from acceptable discourse.¹⁷

This thesis finds a likely causal relationship between the late 1940s publication of the Chamber of Commerce's guidebook to community action, and the wave of grassroots organizing that followed. Its distribution was widespread and its influence is easy to detect, both in the practical steps taken by local-level mobilizers, and the broad ideological trajectory of their engagement. In terms of legitimacy, the Chamber occupied a symbolic middle ground between respectable government-mandated authority of the FBI and the more zealous, less accountable activist fringe. Ostensibly moderate, its programme nevertheless hinted at the natural connection between anticommunism and more wide-ranging conservative authoritarianism. Though the Republican political establishment was reluctant to make common cause with the suburban sleuths, right-wing interest groups like the Chamber of Commerce provided a powerful proxy from which the grassroots could draw ideas and respectability.¹⁸

¹⁷ *A Program for Community Anti-Communist Action*, pp.11-14.

¹⁸ Readership figures for *A Program* are not available, but with distribution for the Chamber's previous three publications ranging from one hundred thousand to seven hundred thousand copies, it can be assumed its reach was extensive.

As well as explicitly “top down” patronage from legal and business elites, community activists received encouragement from a more nebulous network of polemicists and self-declared experts who neither spoke for a popular base, nor carried the weight of status-bestowed authority. These professional anticommunists, to use Cold War liberal parlance, were nevertheless influential voices, providing their knowledge of the communist conspiracy to a range of interested parties and producing reams of campaigning literature, including grassroots manuals.¹⁹

In September 1949, *Alert* — “a weekly confidential report on communism and how to combat it”, produced by two Los Angeles journalists — presented a “Community Teamwork Plan” to its readers. “Not everyone can be a George Washington, a Thomas Jefferson or a Ben Franklin,” the writers explained. “But every leader of organized civic groups can be a Paul Revere to carry the message of freedom’s fight [...] to the people in his own community.” *Alert*’s plan was typical of its genre, with calls to protect churches and schools from communist infiltration and to provide a “positive program” in these institutions for promoting the “truth” (or at least a conservative, patriotic version of the truth) about America’s heritage. Would-be organizers were warned of “crackpots and grafters” who might attach themselves to the cause, instructed to “leave police work to the police” and pre-emptively admonished against ambivalent

¹⁹“The Bigots Behind the Swastika Spree”, leaflet in Folder 14-206, Box 28, *Counterattack* Files.

participation in the counter-subversive crusade: “If you are not with us, wholeheartedly, you are against us!”²⁰

How, from the controversial German-born campaigner Joseph Kamp, was similarly intransigent in tone. Its opening section, “How to be an American”, made the case for hard-line anticommunism as the essential component of US citizenship. Spiritual Mobilization, a religious anticommunist organization founded by Los Angeles clergyman James Fifield, produced *How You Can Fight Communism* in the mid-1950s. John T. Flynn’s America’s Future, Inc., a company that specialized in producing printed attacks on so-called “progressive education”, contributed *You Can Stop Communism*. A practical, nine-point instructional on the rooting out of domestic subversives was even available in an issue of the mainstream lifestyle publication *Look*, albeit one that required patriotic sleuths to ask fairly specific political questions of suspected radicals, such as whether or not they considered the early part of World War Two, prior to Germany’s invasion of Russia, merely a “game of power politics”.²¹

²⁰ *Torrance Herald*, 24 August 1950, p.1; *Alert*, February 1953, Box 12, Radical Right Collection, 1907-1982, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University, Stanford, California; *Alert*, January 1952, Ibid.

²¹ *How*, pamphlet in Box 25, Radical Right; Kamp was one most notorious of the high-profile professional anticommunists. Liberal columnists like Drew Pearson regularly labelled him a “fascist” and an anti-Semite; *How You Can Fight Communism*, pamphlet in Box 5, Radical Right; *You Can Stop Communism*, pamphlet in Box 25, Radical Right; *Look*, 4 March 1947, excerpted in Michael Barson and Steven Heller, *Red Scared: The Commie Menace in Propaganda and Popular Culture* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2001), p.64.

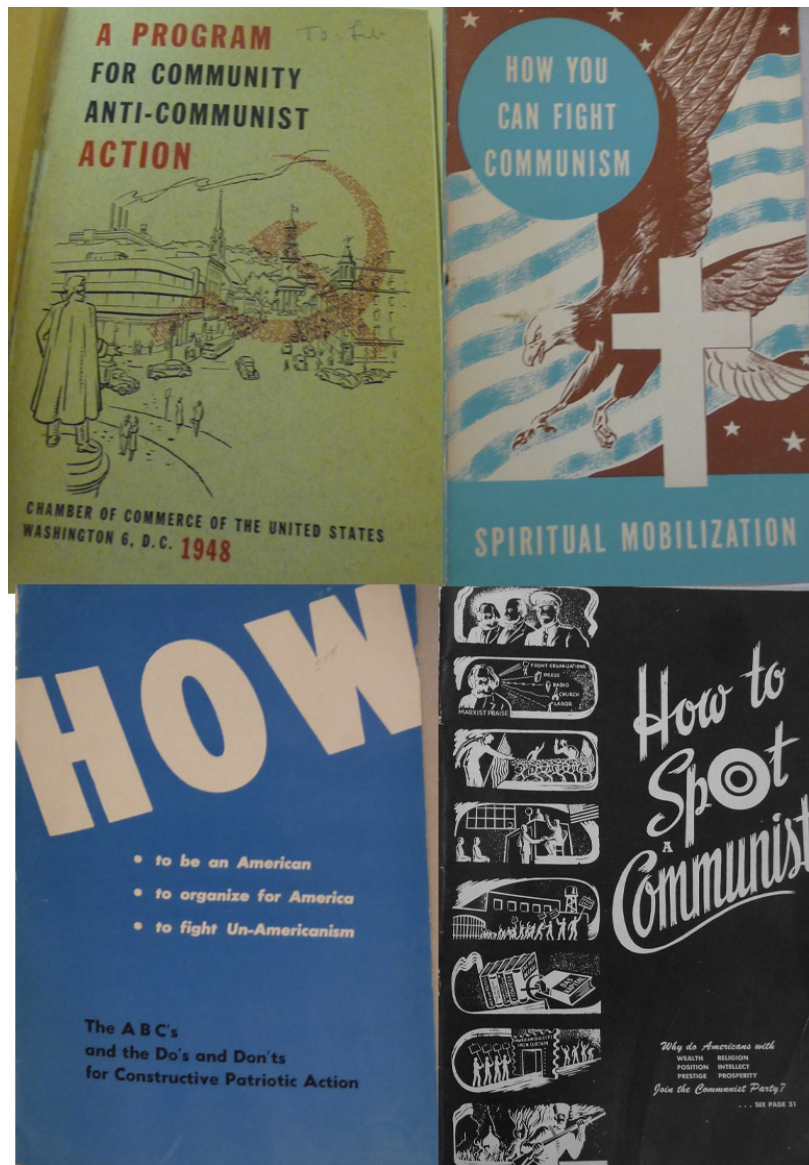


Image 1: Various community counter-subversive guidebooks. Clockwise from top left: *A Program for Community Anti-Communist Action*, *How You Can Fight Communism*, *How to Spot a Communist*, *How*.

What this raft of practical guidebooks shows — remarkably consistent in tone and content — is that grassroots anticommunism stemmed from a solid theoretical foundation. Across the ideological spectrum — from the ostensibly apolitical and authoritative (Hoover), through the respectable mainstream right (the Chamber of Commerce), to the ultra-conservative fringe (Joseph Kamp) — interested bodies urged ordinary Americans to immerse themselves in anticommunist literature, purge their school bookshelves of suspect material

and enlist their neighbours in the cause, all while carefully toeing the line between patriotic community defence and irresponsible vigilantism. The instruction manuals found their way into the hands of activists across the nation, and provide a clear “top down” prerogative for grassroots action. At the same time, this thesis demonstrates that the most active community counter-subversives went far beyond Hoover’s call for vigilance or the Chamber of Commerce’s edict to focus solely on the communist issue. Conversely, the majority of Americans ignored the calls to arms altogether.

A significant reason for this imbalance is the counter-intuitive nature of domestic anticommunism itself. If, on a national level, the heated polemic bore little relation to the potential challenge of dealing with America’s few thousand card-carrying communists, the disconnection was doubly apparent on the community front. The roving pro-Soviet orators depicted in the guidebooks, by and large, did not exist, so instructions to carefully, responsibly “quarantine” them were redundant. This thesis finds that those who did seek to engage with subversion at the grassroots were therefore motivated less by an instinctive patriotism and sense of self-preservation, and more by a variety of other social and political factors — from juvenile delinquency to shifting racial and gender roles.

While this study finds clear evidence of a broad right-wing grassroots response to the red scare, identifying and investigating specific anticommunist groups remains an imprecise science. Many operated with an organizational secrecy to rival that of their leftist foes. Envisaging themselves at the forefront of a quasi-military battle against devious subversives they formed close-knit cells as a

means to ward off infiltration. In the grand scheme of things, they were also small-scale operations, with limited structural organization and, subsequently, little left in the way of membership rolls or internal documentation. The more established bodies — like the veterans — have largely avoided commemorating their 1950s forays into amateur counter-subversion and hard-right politics. What primary evidence that exists is largely representative of the ways in which grassroots groups tried to present themselves to the world during the red scare: pamphlets, posters, letters and mimeographed polemics.²²

Both conservative subscribers and liberal opponents have preserved collections of these materials. Willard Johnson, a former Methodist missionary to China who lectured on the evils of communist rule following his return to the United States, assembled a large stockpile of ephemera from the numerous campaigns to which he subscribed. His archive is now at Yale University and includes material representing a vast range of primary sources, from large-scale concerns to individual letter-writers, and from those with relatively mainstream anticommunist politics to unabashed “hate-groups”. The Hoover Institution’s Radical Right Collection is even more indicative of the breadth and diversity of early Cold War counter-subversion, consisting of over eighty large boxes packed with notes and literature, around half of which are completely unsorted. With such a wealth of correspondence, much speaking boldly of its own significance, it

²² In their broad, late fifties survey of rightist groups, Ralph Ellsworth and Sarah Harris claimed that approximately one thousand organizations were actively producing conservative and anticommunist literature, but acknowledged the difficulty of assessing their true impact: “Some of these organizations are little more than a single dedicated individual, plus or minus a loyal wife, but others [...] claim as many as three million members”. Ralph E. Ellsworth and Sarah M. Harris, “The American Right Wing: A Report to the Fund for the Republic, Inc.”, *Occasional Papers*, No. 59, November 1960, p. 3.

is often difficult to establish what originated from relatively influential factions, and what was the work of minor cranks. Usually, it was a case of gathering all evidence that seemed remotely relevant, and cross-referencing it as research progressed, eventually building up a broad picture of meaningful community activism.

Besides these general compendia of right-wing and anticommunist paraphernalia, this thesis utilizes more specific collections. The Tamiment Library's *Counterattack* research archive demonstrates how the work of amateurs helped to frame the national dialogue. The influential campaigning newsletter and self-styled security bulletin was set up by former FBI agents, and its secret files collated public and confidential material, utilizing research from grassroots groups as well as more reputable sources. The information then formed the basis of printed listings of suspicious individuals, including the widely distributed *Red Channels*, an exposé of alleged show business subversion. Most usefully, Barbara Kopple's Peekskill Riots Papers, also at Tamiment, provide a wealth of primary material — clippings, letters, interviews and personal documents — that was originally compiled for a never-completed documentary film on the Westchester County disturbances.²³

There are various reasons why grassroots anticommunism has been largely overlooked in the extensive documenting of the McCarthy period. On one level it concretely affected fewer people than its elite-level counterpart, with less

²³ *Counterattack* tracked the dangerous activities of everyone from Truman aide and McCarthy target David Demarest Lloyd to “stripteuses” Josephine Baker and Gypsy Rose Lee.

dramatic consequences. But community counter-subversives did leave their mark: as this thesis demonstrates, triumphs included the ousting of school superintendents, the sinking of motion pictures and the recapturing of public space from leftists for patriotic, rather than class-based, celebration. More generally, the presence of dedicated red-hunters in American towns placed ideological nonconformists on notice that they should keep any unorthodox views to themselves.

At other times, the impact of grassroots activists was dramatically self-destructive. The violent anticommunist uprising of Peekskill, New York, appalled mainstream American opinion, and ended up celebrated as a bloody victory by the radicals it had sought to vanquish — a lyric by folk singer Woody Guthrie sneeringly described the “four hundred noblest souls” of “Westchester’s manhood” as looking like “fleas on a tiger’s back” when attacking the “thirty thousand” proud left-wingers. Other community-based actions brought amateur anticommunists into conflict with liberal and moderate factions who interpreted their patriotism as pettily authoritarian, vigilante in character or plain wrongheaded in target.²⁴

Then there are the more lasting legacies of grassroots anticommunism — the backing it provided to McCarthyist politicians through donations and letter-writing campaigns, and the long-term reshaping of the American political landscape it engendered through the honing of tactics and the subtle shifting of

²⁴ Woody Guthrie, “My Thirty Thousand”, available at http://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/My_Thirty_Thousand.htm; *New York Times*, 2 May 1950.

acceptable discourse. Red baiting proved to have limited usefulness as an electoral tactic, and unlike with later conservative mobilizations, Republican Party power brokers were wary of embracing community counter-subversives. Nevertheless, the lurch from moderate Republicanism to hard-line conservatism and the pattern of community engagement suggested by grassroots activists was replicated over the following decades.

In pure policy terms, this thesis shows that grassroots anticommunism anticipated later trends in populist conservative thought. The antecedents of the early Cold War activists, from John Birch Society members onwards, shared many of their grievances: taxes, big government, progressive social values, and elitist liberal intellectuals. The malign “world government” conspiracies of the United Nations — a defining complaint for many red scare activists — even found their way into the national Republican Party platform for the 2012 presidential election. Rather than worrying over UNESCO teaching pamphlets infecting American children with socialism, contemporary “Tea Party” activists had identified Agenda 21 — an obscure, non-binding UN resolution promoting sustainable development — as “erosive of American sovereignty” and ensured the official GOP stance was to reject it along with “any form of global U.N. tax”. Earlier in the year, a Tea Party-backed candidate named Ted Cruz secured the Republican nomination for the Texas senate race in part by promising, in the words of the *New York Times*, to “protect America's golf courses from the United Nations”. While this latest bout of anti-UN organizing, like its 1950s counterpart, can seem fairly ridiculous, it highlights a consistent theme in grassroots conservative thought. It takes a right-wing tenet like private property or

traditional education and presents it as both an essential American ideal and one that is under threat from a vast liberal conspiracy.²⁵

This thesis also finds shared tactical DNA in community counter-subversives and later bouts of conservative mobilization. Through civic clubs, churches, school boards and front room study groups, it shows how right-wing activists brought like-minded middle-class Americans together, and connected existential fears and grand ideological goals with more everyday concerns. In doing so, these highly motivated conservatives politicized community spaces, and worked to turn previously consensus ideas into controversial, radical concepts to be challenged and, if possible, overhauled. These patterns of local-level engagement were replicated — often with more spectacular success, it must be said — throughout the Republican right's post-Eisenhower ascendancy, from the Goldwater Girls to the Tea Party.

The impact of amateur counter-subversion was less immediately obvious than that of the career-destroying “witch-hunts” of the anticommunist establishment — but it was significant, especially to those who participated in the patriotic performance and worked to define what it meant to be an American during the early Cold War. Thus this thesis both illuminates an overshadowed element of the red scare and adds to our understanding of the development of American conservatism.

²⁵ *New York Times* Blogs, 29 August 2012; *New York Times*, 2 August 2012, p.21.

Chapter One

Peekskill Wakes Up:

A Case Study in Community Anticommunism



Image 2: Street banner, Records of the Robeson Riots, Field Library, Peekskill, New York.²⁶

Tommy Tomkins was seventeen years old when he went to a picnic spot called Lakeland Acres, near his home in Peekskill, New York, to fight communists. He paraded on the road outside the campground with his young friends and older men and women, many uniformed military veterans, others just regular townsfolk. He felt no particular enmity towards the target of this protest march — the singer Paul Robeson, who was scheduled to perform an outdoor concert at Lakeland Acres that evening — and indeed had, in the past, enjoyed the music of the celebrated baritone, though he would never have admitted as much to his friends. What he did feel was a sense of patriotism, or at least the sense that it

²⁶ Records of the Robeson Riot, Field Library, Peekskill, New York.

was important to be seen as patriotic in front of his fellow citizens. It was also invigorating to be marching with the veterans, even more so when the protestors broke ranks and pushed on into the concert site, shoving and hitting those in their way, shouting slogans against communists, against Jews. He saw a smartly dressed woman dragged from her car and punched, repeatedly, by his fellow marchers. Tommy Tomkins later reported that he felt scared, excited, frightened and sick as the violence went on around him.²⁷

For the most part, the McCarthy era war on American communists and their fellow travellers was, like its international counterpart, a cold one. As revisionist historians, seeking to move beyond the heated rhetoric of “witch trials” have pointed out, there were no Stalinist purges in America, and even in the context of domestic political upheavals, the episode was relatively restrained. The “fascism” seen by contemporary progressive commentators in the actions of anticommunists was conducted via insinuations and denunciations, rather than the jackboot and the mob assault. There was one particularly dramatic exception to this rule. On the evening of 27 August 1949, and again on the afternoon of 4 September, the patriots of Peekskill — a small town outside New York City — confronted the red menace in their own backyard, and put into violent practice the increasingly vituperative national rhetoric of anticommunism. Paul Robeson, an internationally renowned actor and African-American activist as well as musician, twice attempted to perform recitals for holidaymakers at nearby left-wing summer camps; twice Peekskill’s veterans and their patriotic allies —

²⁷ Undated interview with (now adult) Tommy Tomkins, Folder 14, Box 4, Barbara Kopple: Peekskill Riots Papers, Tamiment Library/Wagner Archives, New York University, New York.

inflamed by Robeson's increasingly controversial status as an outspoken political radical, and by the supposedly subversive status of the event's sponsors — greeted the concerts with militant counter-protests. At the 27 August event, anticommunists took advantage of minimal policing to force their way into the concert grounds, blocking approach roads, destroying seating and equipment, assaulting attendees including women and children, and forcing the performance's abandonment before it had even begun. A week later, the anti-Robeson ranks were separated from their enemies by a massively increased police presence and a "security force" of some two thousand union members organized by the concertgoers. Robeson performed without hindrance but this time the audience members were attacked as they departed the venue, with protestors lining the narrow country roads to pelt buses and cars with rocks, smashing windows, overturning numerous vehicles, and injuring as many as one hundred and fifty people. In the days following the first riot, through the second day of violence and beyond, Peekskill emerged from provincial backwater status to countrywide front-page infamy. The attitude among politicians and the national press was widely critical, but the town itself seemed to be proud of its actions, at least initially. As the slogan popularized locally on posters, bumper stickers and banners had it: "Wake Up America, Peekskill Did".

If one incident could be used to illustrate the growing anticommunist sentiment among ordinary Americans during the early Cold War, and the seepage of McCarthyite zero tolerance into a community setting, the Peekskill riots of 1949 might do so most vividly. At the same time, the events of 27 August and 4 September are so completely atypical of the wider grassroots red scare it is

difficult to extract any meaningful generalizations from the New York town's week of notoriety. Despite their anomalous nature, however, the riots provide a unique and revealing example of what happened when grassroots anticommunist crusaders came into contact with potent local-level tension and a real life display of leftist strength.

Despite its contemporary infamy, scholarship on the Peekskill affair is limited in scope and intent. In 2002, Joseph Walwik published a book-length account, *The Peekskill, New York, Anti-Communist Riots of 1949*, but outside of this text and Paul Robeson biographies, such as Martin Duberman's *Paul Robeson* (which focuses on the impact on the singer, rather than the motivations of his enemies), scant scholarly regard has been paid to the incidents. Even the influential 1955 collection *New American Right*, whose contributors portrayed grassroots conservatives as anti-elitist status warriors with fascist tendencies, did not include within its thesis the conservatives who rioted against a hero of the intellectual left in their midst, despite their superficial compatibility with such a narrative.²⁸

Two texts that do address the significance of the Peekskill disturbances — Richard Fried's *Nightmare in Red* and David Caute's *The Great Fear* — do so in the context of an examination of the occasional tendency towards violence in the wider red scare. For both authors, the Robeson riots were the “most dramatic

²⁸ Joseph Walwik, *The Peekskill, New York, Anti-Communist Riots of 1949* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002); Martin Bauml Duberman, *Paul Robeson* (London: Pan Books, 1991); Bell ed., *The Radical Right*; Principal texts looking at the red scare era — Ellen Shrecker's *Many Are the Crimes*, for instance — omit the episode entirely. Neither Michael Heale's 150-year history of domestic counter-subversion, *American Anticommunism*, nor social critic Joel Kovel's similarly themed study, *Red Hunting in the Promised Land*, mention Peekskill.

physical confrontation” within a trend that also saw the intimidation of Henry Wallace supporters in 1948 and the stabbing of Communist Party leader Robert Thompson in 1950. Like contemporary left-wing journalistic accounts, Cate reductively emphasizes the overtly reactionary elements of the unrest, portraying Peekskill as a “somewhat stagnant, depressingly bigoted town”, insisting local police “openly fraternized” with the most violent protestors, and concluding that, “what most inflamed the natives and veterans was the fact that the concertgoers were not only reds but also ‘niggers’ and ‘kikes’.” This is not to say Cate’s version of events — which hews closely to the account provided by the American Civil Liberties Union in their investigative booklet *Violence in Peekskill* — is not largely correct. Rather the shorthand interpretation it suggests — a closed-minded community motivated to ugly aggression as much by their hatred of “the other” as by any coherent political ideology — ignores most of the complexities that make the Peekskill case unique, and is unhelpful in placing the riots within a wider Cold War framework. The grassroots anticommunism enacted by Peekskill residents in 1949 may have been synonymous, for some, with racism and anti-Semitism, but this leaves questions of why the protests were organized under the auspices of red-baiting, if prejudice against blacks and Jews were so widely expressed and tolerated.²⁹

Parsing the meaning of the Peekskill disturbances is a complicated process. While eyewitness accounts abound, each faction involved in the events brought with it a blinkered perspective. Veterans and groups directly implicated in the

²⁹ Cate, *The Great Fear*, pp.164-167; Richard M. Fried, *Nightmare in Red: The McCarthy Era in Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p.97.

violence sought to play down their role, pointing to provocation and blaming teenage “hoodlums” for the worst offences. Victims of the attacks — communists and others on the left — drew attention to the policing deficiencies, understanding the riots as just one part of a wider societal assault on their political cause. Liberal observers such as the ACLU investigators highlighted racism rather than Americanism as a motivating factor, perhaps keen not to tarnish an anticommunist cause that — when shorn of its more aggressively conservative wing — they broadly endorsed. Most contemporary reaction to the rioting centred on the question of fault for the disturbances — whether it lay with Robeson and his followers for organizing a provocative concert, the local Peekskill press for whipping up antagonism among the town’s residents, the veterans for leading the protest marches which spawned the rioting, unaffiliated teenagers who supposedly hijacked the noble aims of the veterans’ patriotic parade, or the authorities for failing to protect the concertgoers from their adversaries. This chapter looks beyond the politically-charged finger-pointing and asks the following: who were the Peekskill anticommunists, what inspired their actions and what did those actions mean for the wider grassroots movement?

Prior to the riots, the mood in Peekskill was typical of the anticommunist-leaning communities encountered elsewhere in this thesis — certainly not defined by fears of the red menace but with a heightened awareness of the problems of subversion. A town of less than twenty thousand on a scenic curve of the Hudson River, overlooked by the verdant hulk of Bear Mountain to the west and temperamentally far removed from the metropolis of New York City some forty

miles downstream, Peekskill belied its enviable location with a relatively gritty economic outlook. While probably not deserving of Cate's characterization as "stagnant" — as a Manhattan dormitory town in highly prosperous Westchester County, its per capita wealth comfortably outstripped the national average — Peekskill had a more lower middle class population than many of its neighbours, along with a faltering industrial legacy and rural-minded outlook. Though its geography made it suitable as both a commuter hub and tourist centre, the principal economic force in the area was the Standard Brands Company, a food business that produced the nationally-known Fleischmann's Yeast and employed nine hundred non-unionized locals (outstripping the payroll of the next largest factory nine-fold) — a state of affairs that left the town comfortably off but vulnerable to fluctuations in Standard's business. The ACLU's report on the 1949 riots blamed ingrained conservatism for the town's failure to thrive at the rate of nearby communities, claiming backward-minded sentiment among powerful local elites had stunted growth, prompted an exodus of the educated young and left a "citizenry standing outside the mainstream of American progress". If this seemed a harsh assessment in 1949, it did prove prescient. By 1970, a *New York Magazine* article devoted to uncovering the more economically mixed reality behind Westchester County's affluent image, would describe Peekskill as "blue collar", noting its "boarded-up buildings" and "crumbling homes". Ironically, for a town thrust into ill repute as an all-white enclave lashing out at its cosmopolitan summer visitors, it was now twenty per cent black, and even endured a minor race upheaval in 1967, when one hundred and fifty African-American youths rioted and smashed shop windows.³⁰

³⁰ Cate, *The Great Fear*, p.164; *Violence in Peekskill*, Folder 39, Box 1, Peekskill Riots;

Peekskill in the late forties was politically right wing, with the Republican Party dominant in local elections, and it was almost exclusively white. Its whiteness, relative prosperity and political and social conservatism did not guarantee the town a McCarthy-era red scare or a thriving anticommunist community, of course. Countless conurbations shared Peekskill's demographics and never achieved its notoriety. Like Pasadena, Orange County and Connecticut's Gold Coast, it had experienced sporadic instances of grassroots anticommunist organizing prior to its moment in the national spotlight. Indeed, on the very day preparations for the first riot began with the publication of a *Peekskill Evening Star* editorial supporting veterans' plans to protest the Paul Robeson concert, readers of the paper discussed the issues surrounding the establishment of a "pro-American curriculum" in the town's schools. The *Star* itself followed a conservative, anticommunist political line prior to its central role in the build-up to the Robeson riot. In June 1949 the newspaper used the sort of absolutist language it would be criticized for in August to discuss President Truman's attempts at domestic counter-subversion, stating, "we believe that the nation would feel more secure if [...] he now pledged that he would cooperate for eradication of the rats [communist spies]." A few weeks earlier, the *Star* chose the occasion of the town's Memorial Day parade to editorialize that there was "probably no community atmosphere in the country [...] more patriotic than Peekskill." At the parade itself, the town's elected supervisor Charles Doyle opined that there was "only one cure for these kinds of people [the kind who saw

"Westchester: The Land of Let's Pretend", *New York Magazine*, 9 February 1970, Folder 39, Box 3, Peekskill Riots.

“any logic or reason” in the Soviet system] and that is to put them on a boat and send them to Russia where they can get a taste of Communism first hand.” Also in the weeks leading up to the disturbances, anticommunist demagogue Cardinal Francis Spellman of New York visited the local Church of the Assumption to spread his message of Catholic counter-subversion.³¹

As well as various anticommunist impulses demonstrated by Peekskill residents, the community had a complex relationship with the racist right. The ACLU noted that the Ku Klux Klan had, for a number of years, “maintained active branches” in the Peekskill area. However, the most notable incident in the region’s history with the KKK occurred in November 1928 when a parade of eighty Klansmen was violently resisted by local residents. The Klan attempted to march down the main street of the strongly Irish-Catholic community of Verplanck and, according to the *New York Times*, were “met with sticks, stones, bottles and eggs”. A leading Klansman, apparently without noting the irony, claimed a rope had been placed around his neck by the angry mob and that only pleas from less vengeful residents had saved him from a lynching. The Verplanck violence has little direct relevance to events three decades later, except in its important role with Peekskill’s self-conception and local mythology. It was cited repeatedly by anti-Robeson protestors, including by veteran leader Vincent Boyle, both in his initial call for a demonstration parade and his later defence of the spirit in which the march had taken place.³²

³¹ *Peekskill Evening Star*, 23 August 1949, Folder 35, Box 3, Peekskill Riots; *Ibid.*, 26 April 1949, 28 May 1949, 31 May 1949, and 21 June 1949, all excerpted in Malcolm Call’s *Peekskill Evening Star* clippings, Folder 35, Box 3, Peekskill Riots; Walwik, *The Peekskill, New York, Anti-Communist Riots of 1949*, p.22.

³² *Violence in Peekskill*, Folder 39, Box 1, Peekskill Riots; *New York Times*, 9 November 1928.

The most unusual aspect of Peekskill's political make-up was its proximity to numerous rural resorts frequented, in the summer months, by left-wing holidaymakers from New York City. The town and its environs had a transient summer population of around thirty thousand by the late forties, bringing economic benefits but social tensions for the permanent residents. A *New York World-Telegram* article in the wake of the first riot listed twelve local resorts as "Communist party training schools". These included Camp Followers of the Trail, Mohegan Lake, Camp Unity and Camp Beacon on the Peekskill bank of the Hudson. Although understood by the conservative press, and locals, to be monolithically "red", the different resorts incorporated a range of leftist cultural and political ideals, including anarchism, socialism and party-line communism. In contrast to white Peekskill, the resort population was a cosmopolitan group, largely Jewish but with a small African-American minority. They were economically diverse, too, ranging from skilled workers, artists and small traders up through wealthy professionals such as lawyers and doctors. The resorts were culturally self-sufficient, with their own concerts, dances and functions, and the holidaymakers had little interaction with the civic club-based social life of Peekskill or the surrounding villages, venturing into town only to buy provisions. Nevertheless, the resorts and the locals maintained an uneasy symbiotic relationship. A resident named William Brown wrote to the local paper in April 1949 to suggest that, "instead of trying to discourage these people and discourage their business by being discourteous to them, let us all encourage [them] to come here, spend their dollars on our town, help make Peekskill prosper." A *Star* editorial less than a month prior to the Robeson concerts called

out for greater economic interaction between the two factions. "These people are all potential Peekskill shoppers and the vast majority of them do their shopping here," it stated, quoting a figure of \$10 million as the vacationists' worth to the community. "The biggest single business in our area should not be ignored." Paul Morris of the town's Chamber of Commerce endorsed the *Star's* plea the following day.³³

Despite acknowledging the necessity of economic exchange, Peekskill locals had plenty of practical issues with the annual influx of "summer visitors". The tourists' trips into town contributed to a "deplorable" traffic situation, while year-round commuters into New York City were forced to share crowded, stuffy train carriages with thousands of additional passengers during the hottest two months of the calendar. Moreover, for many, the different cultural outlooks seemed insurmountable: a frequent visitor to Camp Followers of the Trail described her summer neighbours as "very conservative." "They're all Republicans," she explained. "When we came here we brought in something new — we went around in halters and shorts. So the first thing was they marked us as a nudist colony. We're nudists! Once you are a nudist you can't be Republican." The lives of the summer campers may have been far removed from the townsfolk's cultural calendar of wagon derbies and Kiwanis Club meetings, but, until the end of the 1949 season, any resentments or tensions were expressed quietly. As Alan Grant, the supervisor of the nearby village of Cortlandt, put it in a Memorial Day message: "Not so many miles from here known leaders of the

³³ *New York World-Telegram*, 29 August 1949, Folder 33, Box 3, Peekskill Riots; *Peekskill Evening Star*, 26 April 1949 and 4 August 1949, Folder 22, Box 2, Ibid.

Communist Party are settled in our midst. The people of Cortlandt never openly or publically [sic] attacked them. We in Cortlandt just never permitted them to get a foothold.”³⁴

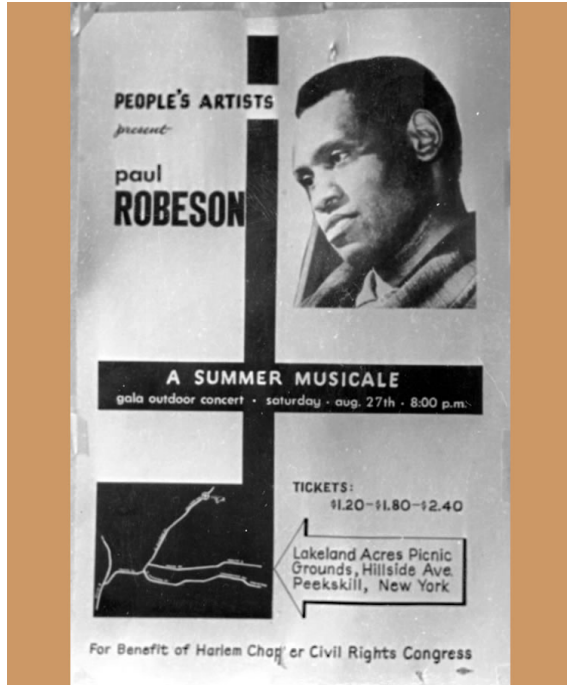


Image 3: Concert poster, Records of the Robeson Riots.

The first sign that anything was changing in Peekskill appeared on 23 August 1949, when the *Evening Star* carried three items related to a forthcoming performance by Paul Robeson in the area. The most prominent was a front-page article reporting the preparations for the concert, which adopted an immediately antagonistic tone. “Paul Robeson, noted Negro singer and in recent months an avowed disciple of Soviet Russia, will make his third appearance in three years in the Peekskill area in an outdoor concert Saturday night,” it began. The first thing to note, in light of the racist motives that would be ascribed to the rioting, is the *Star’s* opening characterization of Robeson as a “Negro singer”, rather than

³⁴ David Leviatin, *Followers of the Trail: Jewish Working-Class Radicals in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p.218, quoted in Walwik, *The Peekskill, New York, Anti-Communist Riots of 1949*, p.49; *Peekskill Evening Star*, 31 May 1949, Folder 35, Box 3, Peekskill Riots.

simply as a singer (indeed, a very famous one), which sounds dismissive to modern ears. On one level, any bias evidenced by the specification of race over professional qualifications should be understood as a product of much wider prejudices than those of the newspaper or the town it served — “Negro singer” or “Negro baritone” was used as a first reference to Robeson in publications across the country, even in entirely sympathetic and supportive articles. Nevertheless, there were also numerous instances where the performer’s activities were reported — notably in the *New York Times* — without overt reference to his race.³⁵

The second obviously loaded statement in the *Star’s* article was its depiction of Robeson as “an avowed disciple of Soviet Russia”. This stemmed principally from a speech he gave at the World Peace Congress in Paris on 20 April 1949, which was reported by the Associated Press and syndicated in newspapers across America the following day, including the Peekskill paper. “I bring you a message from the Negro people of America that they do not want a war [with the USSR] which would send them back into a kind of slavery,” Robeson was said to have announced to the assembled leftists. “It is unthinkable [African-Americans] would go to war on behalf of those who have oppressed us for generations [against a nation] which in one generation has raised our people to the full dignity of mankind.”³⁶

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*; *St. Petersburg Times*, 21 April 1949, p.32.

It is hard to appreciate fully the psychological challenge laid down to American political assumptions, both moderate and conservative, by such a statement. Some six years before the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the birth of the modern civil rights movement, Robeson had apparently ascribed radical ideals to the black population of the US that went far beyond those of the then dominant NAACP. Even those who, at the time, transgressed the colour bar were begrudgingly permitted to do so only when they aspired to inclusion in white American society, such as Jackie Robinson, whose supreme sporting talent had, in 1947, finally forced Major League Baseball to permit blacks to participate in the top echelon of America's favourite pastime; and the soldiers whose sacrifice in World War Two had helped compel Truman at last to desegregate the armed forces. Here was a leading African American — who, like Robinson, had earned the reluctant respect of white America via unanswerable levels of talent and achievement — not respectfully requesting to be allowed to participate in the American dream but actively rejecting it on behalf of his people. In a single proclamation, Robeson synthesized the threat of black rebellion, of socialist critique of America's supposedly democratic ideals, and of disloyalty in the face of looming global conflict. The response, from establishment liberals and conservative anticommunists alike, was swift and damning.

In many ways, Robeson was typical of the average victim of McCarthyism. Neither an innocent nor a spy, he was undoubtedly guilty of a certain sort of apostasy — at least to an energized version of American patriotism espoused most vehemently by the activist right but also tacitly endorsed by the political mainstream. Though not officially a communist, he unashamedly articulated

solidarity with America's enemy, and with an enemy ideology. He was also — like many — guilty of a myopia towards the crimes of Stalinism: a fact that has been used by some liberal observers to, unjustly, ascribe a degree of culpability to leftist victims of McCarthyism, and one which helps explain the lack of historical sympathy regarding Robeson's plight.

Paul Robeson may also have been the highest profile victim of the McCarthy-era red scare, and his fall from grace was almost certainly the steepest. It is reasonable to imagine that, were it not for the domestic Cold War, this son of a former slave would be widely regarded today as one of the most important and impressive African-American figures of the twentieth century. Having established himself as one of the best American footballers in the country while a Rutgers University student, as well as a highly regarded all-round sportsman, Robeson graduated with the highest academic honours ever awarded by the college and embarked on a career as first a professional football quarterback then, after attending Columbia Law School, as a lawyer. But it was his talent for acting and singing — first evidenced as a casual performer while a law student in the early 1920s — that would establish him as a major international star. Over the subsequent decade and a half, Robeson came to be recognized as one of America's leading performers of "Negro spirituals" as well as a stage actor of global renown. He played Othello in a major London production, the first black actor to portray the role among an otherwise white cast in a century, and starred in the classic Hollywood version of the stage musical *Show Boat*, among other major movie roles. Perhaps most significantly of all, in the context of his later battles, he was picked to sing the patriotic song "Ballad for Americans" in a series

of national radio broadcasts in 1939 and 1940 — the tune “stampeded the nation”, the most popular of a number of newly-recorded flag-waving ditties that were eagerly consumed by a country celebrating its good fortune at having both survived the Depression and seemingly avoided involvement in a new world war.³⁷

According to biographer Martin Duberman, by the early 1940s Robeson seemed “[t]o the white world in general [...] a magnetic, civilized, and gifted man who had relied on talent rather than belligerence to rise above his circumstances”. True, whites were aware of his increasingly politicized concern for the plight of his fellow African Americans, yet “the lack of stridency and self-pity in his manner allowed them to persist in the comfortable illusion that his career proved the way was indeed open to those with sufficient pluck and aptitude, regardless of race — that the ‘system’ worked.” More problematic were Robeson’s embrace of class-consciousness and a global socialist perspective, including his solidarity with striking Welsh miners in the late 1920s, Republican fighters in Spain in the 1930s, and his visits to, and outspoken admiration for, the Soviet Union, yet even these forays beyond the establishment-approved practices of race elevation proved relatively undamaging prior to his support for Henry Wallace’s Progressive Party and, most crucially, the Paris Peace Conference speech.³⁸

³⁷Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, p.237.

³⁸*Ibid.*, p.x.

Duberman argues that Robeson was misquoted in Paris, but he expressed similar sentiments in the following months, notably at the June wedding of his son, Paul Robeson Junior, to Marilyn Greenberg, a white woman. Whatever the truth, it was a momentous turning point in the star's relationship with mainstream America — "The outcry was immediate, the denunciation fierce," as Duberman notes. "The white press rushed to inveigh against him as a traitor; the black leadership hurried to deny he spoke for anyone but himself". Jackie Robinson was brought before the House Committee on Un-American Activities to disassociate himself, and by extension, the black public, from the reported remarks. Harassed doggedly by HUAC and the FBI and with his mainstream American appeal in tatters, Robeson eventually had his passport confiscated under the McCarran Internal Security Act for nine years during the 1950s, confining him to the United States and denying him the chance to continue his career in Europe where he remained popular. Mentally broken by his long battles with McCarthyism, he died in 1976 after a decade of near seclusion. The people of Peekskill enjoyed a less complicated relationship with Paul Robeson prior to 1949. His three previous summer concerts passed without incident — barring the low-key grumblings of veterans groups. In 1947, the *Star* even sent a music reviewer, who reported back favourably from the event.³⁹

The second significant item in the *Star's* 23 August edition was a letter from Vincent Boyle, an American Legion member who would take a lead role in the orchestration of the anti-Robeson demonstrations. It began with a reference to a

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.342; *Peekskill Evening Star*, 16 August 1947, p.1, quoted in Walwik, *The Peekskill, New York, Anti-Communist Riots of 1949*, p.47.

national and local health concern — “The present days seem to be crucial ones for the residents of this area with the present epidemic of polio” — and quickly expanded into a vivid metaphor for the danger posed to the community by the existence of subversive musicians in their midst. “Now we are being plagued with another [epidemic], namely the appearance of Paul Robeson and his communistic followers,” Boyle wrote. “It is an epidemic because they are coming here to induce others to join their ranks and it is unfortunate that some of the weaker minded are susceptible to their fallacious teachings unless something is done by the loyal Americans of this area.” As to what the *something* required of local patriots might be, the Legionnaire did not specify, though he did offer the strong suggestion that the course of action might be physical. “Quite a few years ago a similar organization, the Ku Klux Klan, appeared in Verplanck and received their just reward,” he noted. “Needless to say they have never returned.” Boyle insisted he was not “intimating violence” in comparing Paul Robeson and the concert attendees with the vanquished Klansmen of thirty years earlier, then proceeded to intimate it for a further paragraph: “We should give this matter serious consideration and strive to a remedy that will cope with the situation the same way as Verplanck and with the same result that they will never appear again in this area.”⁴⁰

The final item in the *Star* relating to the upcoming concert was an editorial, which struck a tone more gently admonishing than Boyle’s letter, but not without its rabble-rousing flourishes. “It appears that Peekskill is to be ‘treated’ to another concert visit by Paul Robeson,” it began, and went on to lament the

⁴⁰ *Peekskill Evening Star*, 23 August 1949, Folder 33, Box 3, Peekskill Riots.

performer's "tarnished" name, his wasted talents, and his failure to live up to the standard of accommodationist African-American activists like Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver. It noted that the concert would fund an "Un-American political organization" and ended on an ominous note: "The time for tolerant silence that signifies approval is running out."⁴¹

This short sentence would go on to be repeatedly quoted in the reports and investigations that followed the Peekskill disturbances, evidence, it was argued, of the *Star's* culpability for the violence that took place. It is impossible to assess the impact this one phrase had on the collective consciousness of Peekskill's citizens, whether or not a few words in a single editorial, a number of pages deep in that day's newspaper, could have inspired the thousands-strong outbreak of protest and lawlessness. Yet it certainly was consistent with a general feeling among the town's anticommunist community: one that saw its behaviour as a natural reaction to an invasion by those its own government had labelled dangerous subversives.

Regardless of the measurable impact of 23 August's *Star* in terms of shaping subsequent events, it undoubtedly made the impending "summer musicale" at Lakeland Acres the town's major talking point in the following days. Lloyd Whittaker, the president of the Peekskill Chamber of Commerce, declared there was "no room in this community for any person or group of persons whose ideology advocates allegiance to any other form of government than that which we enjoy here in these United States of America," while Cortlandt supervisor

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Grant announced himself “openly opposed” to the Robeson concert. Leonard Rubinfeld, the assistant Westchester County District Attorney, called a special meeting of the Joint Veterans’ Council, of which he was the chairman, to discuss an organized response. Various individual American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars posts had already endorsed a proposed demonstration parade and the JVC followed suit, authorizing a “peaceful protest” to be held “in the best traditions of our country”.⁴²

The *Star* continued to subtly stoke the patriotic, anticommunist mood as the week progressed. On the Wednesday it ran an article detailing an address to the local Lions’ Club branch by Peekskill teacher Pauline Merritt. The educator had recently returned from a year working in Britain under Clement Attlee’s Labour government and described the experience as one of the hardest of her life, blaming socialism and nationalization for everything from the still-in-place wartime rationing to a generalized “lack of initiative” among the populace. The next day the paper reported on an annual wagon derby, attended by some five thousand Peekskill citizens and evidently a highlight of the town’s social calendar, and framed Acting Mayor Edwin Lockwood’s speech celebrating the “free initiative” and “competition” shown by the thirty young racers as an implicit rebuke to the Robeson concert organizers.⁴³

On the Friday before the concert, the *Star* carried an unusual front page editorial, titled “Music or Politics”. The piece acknowledged the threat of physical force

⁴² *Ibid.*, 24 August 1949, Folder 33, Box 3, Peekskill Riots.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 24 and 25 August 1949, Folder 33, Box 3, Peekskill Riots.

perceived by many in the veterans' groups' preparations, stating "Violence? Absolutely not! Let such tactics remain elsewhere — in the trick bags of the undemocratic", but maintained the paper's strong support for the anticommunist action outside the event. The second lead news story, meanwhile, detailed the exact plans for the protest parade, explaining which groups and individuals were supporting the demo — the various veterans' group posts, the Chamber of Commerce, the local Knights of Columbus chapter, the town fire company — as well as providing clear instructions for any reader who wanted to join in with the marchers, who were set to begin their vigil at 7.45pm on the road outside Lakeland Acres.⁴⁴

There was nothing inevitable about the gathering opposition to the Robeson concert. While participants in the protests would later frame them as a spontaneous reaction to the "invasion" of an otherwise peaceable town, the reality is that — even allowing for the main attraction's increased level of notoriety by 1949 — it would have been entirely possible and unremarkable for the summer musicale to pass without much disruption to the lives of the Peekskill residents. Far from a dangerous threat to the town's security and patriotism, the Robeson concert was scheduled to take place on private land near the village of Cortlandt, some four miles or more from downtown Peekskill. No attempts had been made to promote the event to the year-round residents of the area; rather Robeson's appearance, as it had been in previous summers, was solely intended for the enjoyment of the summer camp dwellers. Regardless of the extent to which they bore responsibility for the subsequent violence, it was

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 26 August 1949, Folder 33, Box 3, Peekskill Riots.

undoubtedly only down to the decision of the veterans to coordinate a mass protest in direct confrontation with the concertgoers — as opposed to calling for a boycott, as in previous years, or parading away from the Lakeland Acres picnic grounds — and the *Star's* choice to enthusiastically promote this patriotic parade to its readers that the opportunity for a militant anticommunist uprising presented itself.

The night of the concert arrived with another *Peekskill Evening Star* front-page story on the protest. This time, the headline “Robeson Parade Plans Complete” was placed above even the name of the newspaper. The article read more like promotional literature for the demonstration than a news report. Cutting quickly to the chase with regards to the occasion for the parade — “Russia-loving Negro baritone Paul Robeson is to sing for the benefit of a Communist-front organization” — the *Star* dispensed practical advice along with precise details of the arrangements. It also predicted a further five thousand Peekskill citizens would line the roads around Lakeland Acres to support their neighbours in this patriotic endeavour.⁴⁵

While Leonard Rubenfeld insisted every effort had been made to ensure that the demonstration would be “orderly” and “peaceful”, the atmosphere in Peekskill had become increasingly tense as the concert loomed. Two town residents — Mary Mobile and Chester Rick — received numerous threatening phone calls after the 26 August issue of the *Star* printed their letters opposing the protests and defending the right to free assembly of Robeson and the concert organizers.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 27 August 1949, Box 3, Folder 33, Peekskill Riots,.

Mobile told ACLU investigators she was called “a dirty red bitch” and told to “get the hell out of Peekskill”; Rick was apparently promised he would “see what we’re going to do to guys who write letters like [his].”⁴⁶



Image 4: Protestors' signs, Records of the Robeson Riots.

The precise order of events of the evening of 27 August is disputed, but what is certain is that the worst fears of those who criticized the veterans' plans to protest the Robeson concert, and the local paper's fulsome endorsement of the protest, were quickly realized. American Legion, VFW, Catholic War Veterans and Jewish War Veterans members led a parade along Hillside Avenue, outside the Lakeland Acres picnic ground. Banners with slogans such as “Wanted: Good Americans, Not Wanted: Commies” were displayed and insults were traded between protestors and concertgoers, some solely anticommunist in nature, others using racist and anti-Semitic epithets. The official protest parade was

⁴⁶ *Violence in Peekskill*, Peekskill Riots, Box 1, Folder 39; *Peekskill Evening Star*, 27 August 1949, Folder 33, Box 3, Peekskill Riots.

dismissed by Grand Marshal, and VFW commander, John Zimmer, the entrance track to the concert arena was blocked with vehicles, rocks and other debris, and fighting broke out outside the picnic grounds and within. A young veteran named William Secor was stabbed, allegedly by an unidentified black concertgoer. On a hill overlooking the site of the melee, a cross was burned. Paul Robeson, warned of the violence taking place and trapped in traffic, never made it anywhere near the venue. In the concert arena, seats and equipment were destroyed while the few hundred Robeson fans who had made it through the barricades and crowds formed a series of concentric rings to try and protect themselves from the missiles and fists thrown by the protestors. A witness would later report to the ACLU investigators: "I saw the veterans throwing sticks and stones and rocks and anything they could lay their hands on inside the circle and I saw them charge repeatedly to try and break the line of men defending the women and children."⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Details of first concert obtained from *Violence in Peekskill*, Folder 39, Box 1, Peekskill Riots, newspaper reports in the *Peekskill Evening Star* and other publications, Folders 25-40, Box 3 and oral histories contained in Folder 14, Box 4.



Image 5: Men on car, Records of the Robeson Riots.

In the days following the aborted concert, accusations of blame for the disturbances flew. The veteran leaders and their supporters maintained the aim had always been for a peaceful display of disapproval, rather than direct action against those they believed to be communists, although Milton Flynt — commander of the Peekskill Legion post and one of the main parade organizers — tellingly informed the *Star* that the “objective was to prevent the Paul Robeson concert and I think our objective was reached”. Other veteran spokespeople pointed to provocation, rather than pre-meditated confrontation. The stabbing of William Secor was repeatedly cited as the riot’s starting point. However, one veteran interviewed by journalists described himself and his fellow protestors initially reacting to taunts from within the concert grounds: “Some of us rushed down from the road and tackled these guys and one of our boys, William Secor, got stabbed. We dragged him back to the road and took him to the hospital. We went on with the parade we had planned but then word

about the stabbing spread around and we got mad and lost our heads. That started the riot.” The key point here is that this account, if true, means that veterans had already forced their way onto the private concert grounds and begun to battle the audience before the stabbing occurred. This was backed up by statements from numerous concertgoers who claimed to have witnessed violent confrontations throughout the early evening, and by Phyllis Sellers, a neighbour of Secor, who stated in a letter to the *Star* that the young veteran was at “the vanguard of the attack on the defenders of the [concert] gate” and demanded to know who “pushed Billy into the fray”.⁴⁸

Another contentious point was the cross burning, cited by Robeson and his supporters as evidence of Ku Klux Klan involvement in the trouble. In fact, according to an anonymous interview conducted by Joseph Walwik forty years later, the six-foot structure was built and set alight by an eighteen-year-old named Robert Varian and several friends with no connection to the KKK, simply as a means to try and scare Paul Robeson. Still, the dismissive attitude of protest supporters towards the concertgoers’ fears was instructive as to the regard in which they held their adversaries’ rights, and the relative lack of concern at suggestions of organized racist violence. Peekskill County Clerk Robert Field assured a Democratic rival that “only one small cross was burned [...] as a prank”, while the *Star* called the act “the prank of several children” and complained it had been “immediately seized upon by Communist sympathizers”

⁴⁸ *Violence in Peekskill*, Folder 39, Box 1, Peekskill Riots; *New York World-Telegram*, 29 August 1949, Folder 33, Box 3, Peekskill Riots; letter from Phyllis Sellers, Folder 17, Box 4, Peekskill Riots.

— as though connecting the presence of a fiery cross at a riot in which blacks and Jews were targeted for attack to KKK involvement was a wild leap of logic.⁴⁹



Image 6: Black patrons and the mob, Records of the Robeson Riots.

Racism was clearly a factor in the 27 August riot, with many witnesses contradicting veteran leaders' claims that the protests were solely aimed at subversives, citing anti-Semitic and anti-black insults and reporting that Jewish and black victims were deliberately attacked ahead of their non-minority counterparts. Some demonstrators were proud of their bias, as with one young woman interviewed by the *Daily Compass* in Peekskill town centre. "I'm just sorry Robeson got away," she said. "Boy, wouldn't it have been something if the cops had come up there and found old Robeson hanging to a tree!" To an extent, the claims of the concertgoers of overwhelming and virulent racism should be

⁴⁹ Interview quoted in Walwik, *The Peekskill, New York, Anti-Communist Riots of 1949*, p.64; *Peekskill Evening Star*, 30 August 1949, Folder 22, Box 2, Peekskill Riots.

treated with a degree of caution. It is easy to see why a crowd of Jews and African Americans, confronted by an angry mob of near-exclusively white protestors shouting abuse, would conclude religious and racial hatred to be the primary motivating factor for their aggressors. Some of the taunts heard by witnesses and victims, meanwhile, seem oddly elaborate and specific ("The Jews are all Reds and they started this, and now they're getting what's coming to them"). Yet the reports are too numerous and consistent to conclude that racism was anything less than a major secondary motivating factor in the disturbances, reasoning that is backed up by reactions from Peekskill residents in the subsequent days.⁵⁰

According to the ACLU's report, the mood in Peekskill in the days following the first concert was a mixture of defensiveness and pride. A large banner reading "Wake Up America: Peekskill Did!" was hung above the main road heading out of town in the direction of Cortlandt. The slogan was displayed on car bumper stickers and on placards around the town. While editorials in the *Star* and official statements from groups involved in the protest offered superficial criticisms of the rioting, there was little soul searching over the wisdom of organizing the protests in the first place. These continued to be viewed as a coherent and inevitable reaction to the threat posed by a subversive musical gathering. A missive from the Hendrick Hudson Post of the American Legion even went as far as to suggest that the riotous conclusion of the parade "may yet serve a good purpose in that it has helped to awaken the American people out of their passive attitude towards Communists and their fellow travelers".⁵¹

⁵⁰ *Daily Compass*, 31 August 1949, Folder 12, Box 3, Peekskill Riots; *Violence in Peekskill*, Folder 39, Box 1, Peekskill Riots.

⁵¹ *Peekskill Evening Star*, 31 August 1949, Folder 22, Box 2, Peekskill Riots.

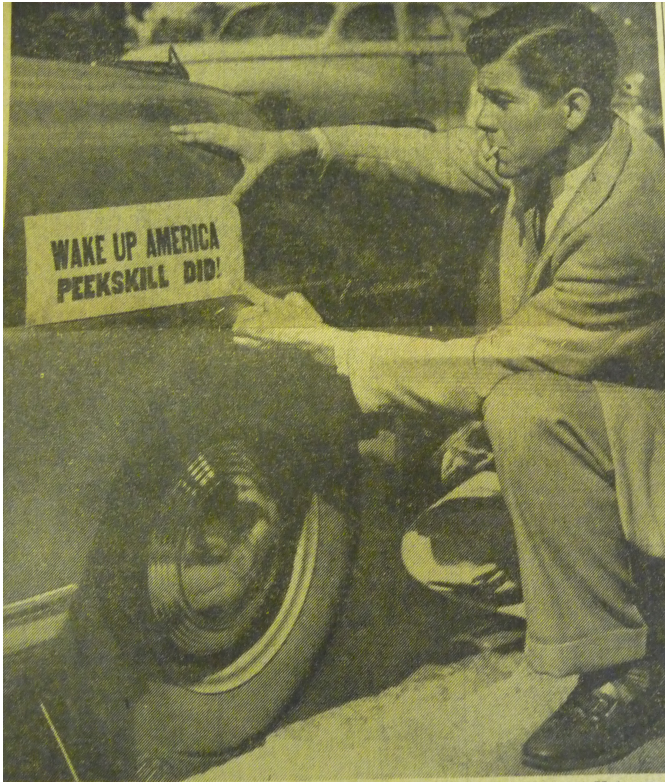


Image 7: Patriotic motorist, clipping from *New York Journal American*, 4 September 1949, Folder 29, Box 3, Peekskill Riots.

Letter writers to the *Star* both critiqued and praised the paper's uncompromising stance on the concert, with the general sentiment among anti-Robesonites being a belief that the violence was both unavoidable and a means to an end. One suggested "August 27 should be celebrated annually as 'Patriots' Day' in Peekskill", while James Buchanan felt proud enough of his fellow citizens' actions to compose a verse dedicated to his "Peaceful City", although not proud enough to permit his name to be printed alongside it:

We stand up for law and order and we try to make it clear
 That we just don't like the Commies
 So go back right over there

One message wondered darkly why the identity of the owner of “Lake Land Acres” was being “keepted very quite [sic]” in newspaper reports, while James O’Shea of the Reserve Officers Training Corps used the official ROTC letter-head to write directly to a defender of the Robeson concert, calling her “a very foolish woman” and warning “We have taken the licence numbers of every car that came in the road to your meeting place and are checking the names.” Meanwhile, the campaign of threatening phone calls against critics of the anticommunists intensified.⁵²

The build-up to the second Robeson concert, and second patriotic parade, mirrored the first, only with heightened hostility on all sides and the added pressure of the national spotlight. Once the singer made it clear he intended to return to the Peekskill area at the coming weekend, the veterans made plans to picket the concert again. A newly formed Associated Veterans Group announced a goal of attracting some thirty thousand anticommunists to the second musicale venue of the Hollow Brook country club and golf course, just down the road from the original concert site, an optimistic figure that was reached by adding together the membership of Legion, VFW and CWV posts from across Westchester County. They instructed the year-round residents of the Peekskill area to decorate their homes with American flags to demonstrate local solidarity with the counter-subversive cause, but rejected a request by District Attorney George Fanelli to hold their protest within the town proper, preferring once again to confront Robeson’s supporters directly.

⁵² Various letters, Folders 17-18, Box 4, Peekskill Riots.

The atmosphere became more ugly as the Sunday afternoon of the second concert got closer. On the Friday rifle shots were fired at the home of Stephen Szego, the owner of Hollow Brook; the next night his house was dowsed in kerosene and partially set on fire. On the morning of his performance, police cut down two effigies of Robeson that had been hung in Peekskill town centre. The *Star*, meanwhile, became more entrenched in its opposition to the concert and its support for the veterans. On the Wednesday it published an editorial that did not mention Robeson or his supporters by name but noted: "There are not many now who dare to defend Russia and Communism. Some who did have learned their error or else have been taught by bitter experience that they should keep their thoughts to themselves." The same day it reprinted an opinion piece from the *New York Daily News* that explained political violence as the inevitable result of a legal "double standing" that held leftists to be both "subversive" and yet guaranteed their free speech: "Most Americans, and especially young veterans who recently fought to save their country, are not much impressed by fine legal distinctions. Their tendency is to go in for some direct and hardboiled action when they run afoul of people whom they know to be bent on overturning our government and making slaves of us all."⁵³

If the second leg of the Battle of Peekskill was intended to be a competitive show of strength for both sides, their numbers enhanced by the national notoriety of their opening encounter, it seemed initially on Sunday that Robeson's followers were the clear victors. Despite their appeals to countywide anticommunist unity,

⁵³ *Peekskill Evening Star*, 2 September 1949, Folder 22, Box 2, Peekskill Riots; *Ibid.*, 3 September 1949, Folder 22, Box 2, Peekskill Riots.

and Vincent Boyle's promise of a ten-mile-long procession, the veterans were only able to muster a turnout similar to the first fracas, around two thousand marchers. The concertgoers, meanwhile, had swelled their number to between fifteen and twenty thousand. Some two thousand volunteers, union workers from New York City, were deployed to protect the perimeter of the event area from another invasion. They were well armed with makeshift weaponry (including 300 baseball bats but, as a *Daily News* editorial quipped, "no balls, no masks, one glove") and operated with military-style discipline, ignoring the insults and projectiles hurled by protestors to hold their line steadfastly.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ *New York Journal-American*, 4 September 1949, Folder 29, Box 3, Peekskill Riots; *New York Daily News*, 7 September 1949, Folder 27, Box 3, Peekskill Riots; *Ibid.*, 6 September 1949, Folder 27, Box 3, Peekskill Riots.



Image 8: Scenes from the second protest, clippings from unknown publication, Folder 14, Box 3, Peekskill Riots.

As at the first concert, the various veterans' groups and their allies marched, and once more were dismissed by their marshals. A demonstrator named Harold Davis — a well-known local character, according to witnesses — paraded on horseback and repeatedly attempted to rouse the crowd to charge the concert gates. In his exuberance he struck a police officer with his riding whip and was immediately arrested. Another crowd surge collided with one of the enterprising locals who had set up inflatable concessions and ice cream stalls to tempt the assorted patriots. Onlookers reported the surreal site of dozens of brightly coloured balloons escaping peacefully above the stricken seller and drifting away towards Lake Peekskill. The crowd was a strange mix of carnival atmosphere and simmering aggression. Women and children ate picnics while local police reportedly socialized with protestors shouting anti-Semitic and racist insults. Late arrivals to the concert were greeted with volleys of spittle from those lining the roads, but inside the Hollow Brook country club the summer musicale was finally able to get underway, eight days late. A performance schedule belonging to the folk singer Pete Seeger showed that Paul Robeson was the sixth attraction on the bill. He followed a rendition of "The Star Spangled Banner", various piano and vocal performances, and a set of American folk songs from Seeger. The seventh item on the agenda, a hand-scrawled addendum that was presumably the work of Seeger himself, read simply "Rocks and Murder".⁵⁵

The first cars to exit the grounds after the concert were struck with stones, and their windows smashed. Their occupants, unable to see to drive through the

⁵⁵ *Peekskill Evening Star*, 6 September 1949, Folder 22, Box 2, Peekskill Riots; Press release from Pete Seeger, Folder 45, Box 3, Peekskill Riots.

throng, were hauled from the vehicles and beaten. The police tried to clear the gates of anticommunists and directed the concertgoers away to the east up Red Mill Road, but the barrage continued all along the narrow lane. Veterans, teenage boys, housewives and young girls joined in the assault, the *Star* reported, armed with everything from “pebbles to boulders and from twigs to clubs.” With around eighty buses and more than five hundred cars needing to clear the concert site, the attack continued for hours, and spread over a distance of some ten miles. In all, as many as one hundred and fifty concertgoers were injured, some eight seriously, with broken limbs and concussion to go with bruises and glass cuts. Several vehicles were overturned and destroyed. Depending on reports, between one and two dozen protestors were arrested, all at the concert gates, where state troopers had remained, preventing the armed union guards from clashing with the remaining demonstrators, but leaving the fleeing patrons to run the gauntlet of rocks unprotected as the evening drew in.⁵⁶

If the Peekskill anticommunists’ response to the first riot had been a combination of denial, defiance and celebration, they reinvested in all three immediately following the second disturbance. “The patriotic parade of protest held at the communistic concert at Peekskill was intended to awaken the American people to the imminent, terrible threat of Communist treason,” Westchester County CWV commander Eugene Hack announced. “We feel that it has accomplished that end to a large extent.” Blame for any violence, Mayor John Schneider contended, “rests solely on the Robesonites as they insisted on coming to a community where they weren’t wanted”. Hack added that his own group

⁵⁶ *Peekskill Evening Star*, 6 September 1949, Folder 22, Box 2, Peekskill Riots.

“decr[ied] the disorderly” rioting of the parade’s aftermath, but felt relief that “none of the marching veterans played any part in it.” District Attorney Fanelli would take a similar line in his grand jury report on the riots, insisting it was merely excitable local youths who participated in stoning and assaulting Robeson’s followers after the veterans had completed their disciplined protest, uncompromised — presumably — by his own assistant’s role in organizing the two patriotic parades.⁵⁷

While it is surely true that teenagers took part in the mob violence that followed the 4 September gathering — David Miller, a sixteen-year-old arrested for helping overturn a car claimed he had been recruited, along with a truck full of similarly restless boys, for the express purpose of causing mayhem outside Hollow Brook golf course — it is disingenuous to attempt to absolve veterans and older anticommunists of the most militant actions. Press photos clearly show men dressed in the uniforms of ex-soldiers throwing punches and rocks. The other arrested men, including the forty-eight-year-old horse rider Harold Davis, twenty-five-year-old police chief’s son Joseph Lillis (charged with throwing rocks at cars) and twenty-nine-year-old Robert Lent (found carrying a hunting knife in an ankle holster), were mostly mature adults. Moreover, the exact level of involvement of the organized anticommunist groups in the rock throwing and fighting is not in the end hugely relevant. By deciding once more to confront those they saw as subversive enemies in a direct action designed to disrupt — if not violently overrun — a peaceful gathering, only a week after a similar protest had devolved into lawlessness and destruction, the veteran

⁵⁷ *New York Daily News*, 6 September 1949, Folder 27, Box 3, Peekskill Riots.

leaders were basically accepting the potential for further disturbances and acknowledging their compatibility with wider patriotic goals. Their statements, even in claiming exoneration, revealed as much. "The Communist propaganda mill called our bluff, so to speak, and the veterans and their supporters took up the challenge," explained Vincent Boyle, adding that 4 September was "an epochal day for Peekskill and the United States."⁵⁸

The *Peekskill Evening Star* took a similarly historically-minded approach in its first editorial response to the second Robeson concert, elevating local patriots to the status of their most illustrious American forebears. "It may be that more good than harm will come from the two recent unpleasant Cortlandttown incidents," it wrote. "The Boston Tea Party was not in accordance with then existing law, but historians agree that the patriots who participated focused attention on a great injustice as it could not have been done in any other matter." The clashes at Hollow Brook, far from demonstrating the dangers of excessive anticommunism, offered proof of the necessity of a hard-line approach. "When it is possible for a subversive organization to assemble on short notice some 10,000 persons, invade an otherwise peaceful community on a Sabbath afternoon, and create a situation by which the health and safety of our citizens is threatened, it would seem to be just about time for our Federal officials to do something more effective than they have yet done about it," it opined, adding: "If Russia were to declare war on the US, how many supporters of the Soviet Union

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

could these Communists assemble over night, not on a golf course, but in the heart of an industrial center?"⁵⁹

The *Star's* readers, too, did not seem overly concerned with the extravagances of their local counter-subversives. "We do not approve of mob violence. In these instances it was practically asked for," commented one. "Communism is a dirty business," offered another. "Let us give them blow for blow." A letter-writer named Mrs. V. J. D'Onofino provided a lyrical tribute to the most militant demonstrators: "So more power to the 'boys' of Peekskill and the rocks by our roadside. Rioting and mob violence is never a pretty sight, but sometimes it serves a purpose. So wake up America, Peekskill did, and for heaven's sake stay awake." Chas De Luca, meanwhile, simply suggested a change of the community motto, "from the Friendly Town, to Peekskill an American Town."⁶⁰

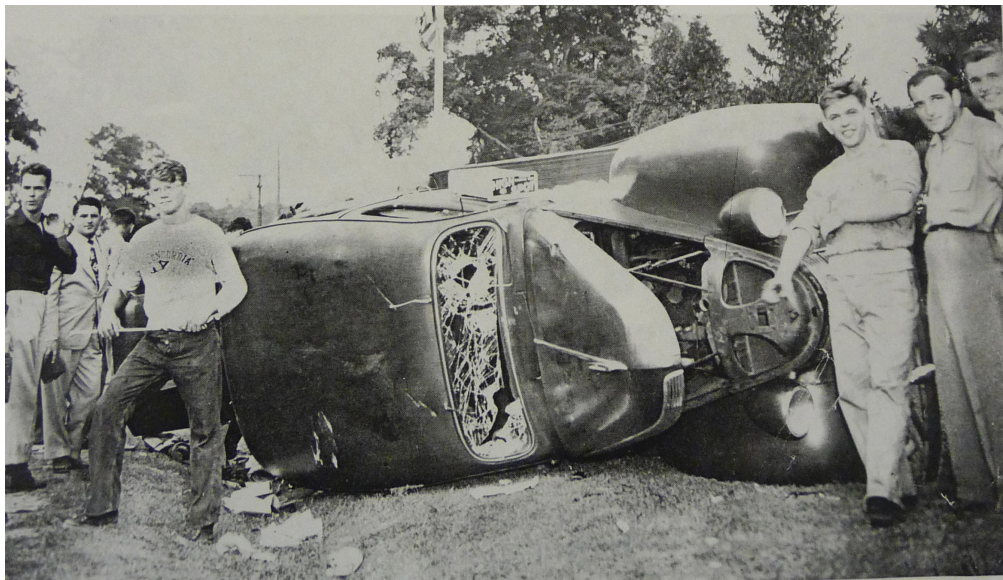


Image 9: Protestors pose by overturned car, clipping from unknown publication, Folder 14, Box 3, Peekskill Riots.

⁵⁹ *Peekskill Evening Star*, 6 September 1949, Folder 22, Box 2, Peekskill Riots.

⁶⁰ Various letters sent to editor of *Peekskill Evening Star*, Folder 17, Box 4, Peekskill Riots.

As to America's verdict on Peekskill's claim to represent it, the responses were more mixed. The *New York Times* came out unequivocally against the anticommunists in its editorial comment on the second riot, calling them "a disgrace to the community and a reminder that as great violence can be done to democracy by a gang of hoodlums in Westchester County as by a lynch-mob in darkest Georgia." The *Times* made efforts to draw a distinction between youthful "hoodlums" and more respectable veteran protestors, and to acknowledge the supposed hypocrisy of communist-sympathizers in demanding the right to free assembly when they themselves would deny it to others given the opportunity, but the overall tone was overwhelmingly negative. The potent "lynch-mob" allusion echoed the concert organizers' emphasis on the racist motivations of the protestors, while the editorial's conclusion — contrasting the violent suppression of other voices in the name of American freedom with General Eisenhower's argument that all freedoms are interconnected, "a single bundle" — attempted to distinguish between the "extremism" of Peekskill anticommunists and the approved "middle of the road" approach of the future president.⁶¹

The *New York Herald and Tribune*, though careful to acknowledge the existence of supposed "communist [...] martyrology" in the complaints of victims, called the second disturbances an "ugly little riot" and an "inexcusable episode". Even the *New York Daily News*, which breezily dismissed the 27 August violence as the inevitable "cut[ting] loose" of "young veterans" inflamed by red fronts which mocked American values with impunity, now conceded: "The Commies won at

⁶¹ *New York Times*, 6 September 1949, Folder 32, Box 3, Peekskill Riots.

Peekskill, no doubt about it.” The Hearst-run *New York Daily Mirror* continued to blame Robeson for the outbreak of violence, but its tone had shifted subtly: from “He asked for it” to “He wants conflict. Let us not fall for it”.⁶²

This altered tenor was reflected elsewhere, too. Commentators able to enjoy the *schadenfreude* of seeing Robeson’s first musicale silenced — through albeit “ugly” means — balked at revelling in the widespread stoning of buses and cars, and the hospitalization of women and children. The local *Reporter Dispatch* newspaper from nearby White Plains exemplified this more cautious, less celebratory approach in two editorial cartoons: the first, after the August disturbance, enthusiastically mocked concertgoers as ranting hypocrites, decrying police one minute then calling out for their help the next; the second, following the September riot, was more muted and stern, with a red rag of communism being waved before the angry bull of mob violence.⁶³

There was a practical reason for the more reproachful coverage, outside of the Peekskill press. The second attempted Robeson concert took place in the glare of both the national spotlight and the afternoon sun. As a result, the anger, violence and destruction of property was more vividly documented by photographers on 4 September than it had been on 27 August. Instead of a few ill lit images of smashed concert equipment and damaged vehicles, newspapers were able to present the second disturbances in extended pictorials. A much-reproduced image showed a portly policeman holding back a group of young women

⁶² *New York Herald and Tribune*, 6 September 1949, Folder 28, Box 3, Peekskill Riots; *New York Daily News*, 30 August 1949 and 7 September 1949, Folder 29, Box 3, Peekskill Riots.

⁶³ White Plains, New York, *Reporter Dispatch*, 3 September 1949 and 7 September 1949, Folder 40, Box 3, Peekskill Riots.

protestors, who were angrily thumbing their noses at concertgoers. Whether a publication chose to present the jeering women as a menace, their “faces distorted with hate”, or more as a curious, even amusing spectacle (“They didn’t like the music,” as the New York *Daily News*’ caption drily put it), the striking photograph was not exactly a flattering portrayal of Peekskill’s female population, and arguably more damaging to its self-conception as a respectable, conservative town than pictures of equally enraged young men. Similar to the troublingly transgressive nature seen in the most militant female segregationists — as noted by Karen Anderson in her study of the Little Rock, Arkansas, school crisis of 1957 — these aggressive girls likely “violated deeply held conventions regarding the proper behavior for genteel young women.”⁶⁴

⁶⁴ *New York Daily News*, 5 September 1949, Folder 27, Box 3, Peekskill Riots; Unknown publication, Folder 14, Box 3, Peekskill Riots; Karen Anderson, *Little Rock: Race and Resistance at Central High School* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), p.124.



Image 10: Police hold back jeering protestors, clipping from unknown publication, Folder 14, Box 3, Peekskill Riots.

Very few national commentators continued to offer an unequivocal defence of the Peekskill anticommunists after the second showdown. Ultra-conservative columnist Westbrook Pegler included what he termed the “Communist riot” at Hollow Brook in a provocatively titled 14 September article “We Need Vigilantes Again”, although the reference served mainly to contrast police reactions there with those towards what he deemed “atrocities” committed by striking United Auto Workers members in Buffalo. Pegler, an increasingly polarizing figure who openly favoured the KKK over his hated union enemies and advocated the death penalty for communists and fellow travellers, was at the extreme end of mainstream right-wing opinion. Other favourable responses came from even

more unsavoury sources. Gerald Smith's anti-Semitic newsletter *The Cross and the Flag* and the *Bulletin* of the neo-Nazi National Renaissance Party published approving articles on the riots, with the latter organization boasting of bringing stickers reading "Behind Communism Stands — The Jew!" to Peekskill and "placing them in the hands of eager veterans". Few involved in the protests explicitly professed to have struck a blow for white supremacy as well as anticommunism but there were certainly those further afield who were happy to ascribe such an outcome. In Florida, a leading Ku Klux Klansman called for a weeklong, nationwide series of cross burnings in protest at Robeson and in solidarity with Peekskill's anticommunists. Among the letters and telegrams District Attorney Fanelli received from around the country were missives wondering "why the people in authority in New York stand for that unholy Communist line handed out by negroes, Jews and friends of Moscow" and suggesting he "send that nigger Robeson to Russia".⁶⁵

In the end, Fanelli's grand jury investigation into the riots largely cleared the demonstrators of racism or anti-Semitism, concluding that "[d]espite the superficial indications of racial and religious prejudice in some of the epithets hurled at the concert-goers, it is clear from the evidence that the fundamental cause of resentment and the focus of hostility was Communism." The Westchester jurors' report also mocked the ACLU's analytical efforts as "flimsy" and "so far from the truth as to be scandalous", absolved police of any failure to protect concertgoers, and condemned the anti-Robeson rioters in similar terms

⁶⁵ Transcription of articles from *The Cross and the Flag*, October 1949, and *National Renaissance Bulletin*, September 1949, Folder 52, Box 3, Peekskill Riots; Transcription of article from *New York Post*, 3 January 1950, *Ibid*; *St. Petersburg Times*, 4 September 1949, p.1; Letters to Westchester District Attorney George Fanelli, Folder 48, Box 3, Peekskill Riots.

to the mainstream press. Yet the most striking aspect of the twenty-six-page account was the surprising, and highly politicized, reimagining of its purpose. By far the bulk of the Westchester Grand Jury's conclusions concerned not the perpetrators of the Peekskill violence, but its target. In terms of emphasis and language used, Fanelli's report appeared largely untroubled by anticommunist aggression and conservative militancy, when compared with the danger posed by the left-wing presence in the area. If anything, despite its denunciation of the ultimately criminal nature of the veterans' protest, the grand jury endorsed the necessity for such grassroots counter-subversion, stating that it "doubts that the potential risks of having Communist 'cells' in Westchester County are fully appreciated by its residents" and that "[c]ommunity leaders and local organizations should undertake to make certain that ignorance regarding this movement is dispelled." Conversely, by emphasizing the efficacy with which the concert organizers assembled both guards and patrons for the second concert, and the public sympathy they gained when their musicale was once more attacked, the report effectively declared victory for the left-wing groups at Hollow Brook golf course. Thus, the most high-level establishment response to Peekskill simultaneously voiced approval for the anticommunists' aims, and branded their efforts to enact them a failure.⁶⁶

Supportive or otherwise, the national attention was not generally welcomed in Peekskill. A few days after the 4 September concert, Paul Morris of the Chamber of Commerce and Raymond O'Brien, chairman of the Peekskill Council of

⁶⁶ Westchester County Grand Jury investigation into the Peekskill riots, Folder 58, Box 3, Peekskill Riots.

Christian Clergymen, convened a meeting of local businessmen, religious leaders and veterans, at least partly to seek ways of redressing the negative publicity surrounding their town. Morris revealed the existence of letters from summer residents calling the town a “fascist pesthole” and warning of a boycott of its “bloodthirsty merchants”. A chemist and a store manager confirmed fears of organized economic action against the Peekskill community, saying they had been instructed by leftists to withdraw advertising from the *Star*. Veteran leaders John Zimmer and Milton Flynt went on record as considering the boycott warnings “godless, ruthless and vicious”, while a Jewish gift shop owner revealed that he too had been told of sanctions against his business, only this time by anticommunists targeting Jewish merchants. Samuel Slutzky, the commander of the Jewish War Veterans, also spoke to the persistent anti-Semitism among Peekskill’s patriotic community, in spite of his own group’s participation in the protests against Robeson: “Unfortunately a good many people of our community feel that all Jews are Communists.” Slutzky’s comments were a tacit admission from within the anticommunist ranks of the overlap between bigotry and Americanism for many protestors — despite the conclusions of the grand jury. O’Brien — who described himself as seeking a third way between sympathy for Robeson and tolerance of mob violence — offered further testimony of persistent belligerence among locals: “A most frightening thing is that responsible men also took part in the violence and they still feel proud of it. They have no feeling of shame or contrition.” A week later, some thirteen local clergymen signed a statement to the *Star* lamenting that “a vicious example of lawlessness has been held up to the world as our way of life”.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ *New York Times*, 10 September 1949; Chester A. Smith, *Peekskill, A Friendly Town: Its Historic*

The unease with which Peekskill's investment-conscious business leaders perceived their town's newfound infamy was further illustrated by the divisions within the Chamber of Commerce itself. In early 1950 Paul Morris was asked to resign from his position as executive secretary, apparently after submitting a prospective magazine article titled "This Can Happen to You". The hastily withdrawn piece purported to tell the true story of the Robeson riots and the author imagined it would have "cushioned much of the damage being done to our city at the present time". Morris told conservative writer George Sokolsky, who took up the case in his syndicated column, that he was also hoping to show readers how a "community can be infiltrated, civically [sic] sabotaged and unjustly 'framed' as a picture of 'horrible un-American hoodlumism' to be held up to a bewildered nation while lovers of foreign 'art' loudly clack their [...] tongues and wag reproaching fingers at us." Chamber president Lloyd Whittaker declined to comment on his former colleague's dismissal, but it is fair to assume that he may have felt there were better ways of restoring Peekskill's reputation than dredging up old battles in the pages of a national magazine.⁶⁸

Despite the misgivings of some of the town's economic and civic boosters, Peekskill's citizen anticommunists maintained their vigilance in the months following Robeson's visit. In April 1950, a Catholic organization from New York hosted what was described as "Peekskill's first anticommunist forum". A former local Legion commander chaired the event and lecture topics included such

Sites and Shrines: A Pictorial History of the City from 1654-1952 (Peekskill: Highland Press, 1952), p.427.

⁶⁸ *Peekskill Evening Star*, 17 January 1950, Folder 35, Box 3, Peekskill Riots.

grassroots-appropriate themes as “Counter Measures Against Communism”. The *Star* reassured anyone fearing further confrontation with local leftists that the “forum has been conducted in New York City and the presence of Communists or their sympathizers have never embarrassed the speakers”. A few weeks later, reformed communist speaker and FBI informant Louis Budenz drew a reported thousand-strong crowd to a high school in nearby Croton with the promise that he would reveal the names of local party members, “so that the people may know their neighbors”. In the event, an audience that included representatives of some seventeen civic groups, as well as the precautionary measure of the entire Croton police department, had to make do with the revelation that there was a “particular concentration” of subversives in Westchester and that these unnamed un-Americans constituted a “reserve” for the front-line New York City forces. Away from the public glare, Peekskill area patriots continued to fight communism on the home front — as Croton resident Mary Plager put it in a letter to the *Star* — “not because we enjoy it, but because the necessity has been forced upon us.”⁶⁹

“If 75,000 fanatical Communists can indoctrinate, control, and activate an estimated million dupes and camp followers, surely the American Legion’s more than three million members can arouse, warn, and instruct the remaining 139 million of our citizens,” wrote national commander James O’Neil in 1948. “The task is clear, the weapons and tools are available — let’s go!” By the late summer of 1949, newly elected Legion chief George Craig was minded to be rather more

⁶⁹ *Peekskill Evening Star*, 4 February 1950, 10 April 1950, 11 April 1950 and 29 April 1950, Folder 35, Box 3, Peekskill Riots.

cautious in his rhetoric. “The American Legion believes in the preservation of law and order and does not countenance violence in any situation short of war,” Craig told reporters, two weeks after several hundred of his charges ran amok in Westchester County. “The Legion will not give its official sanction to counter-demonstrations such as those at Peekskill. It prefers to leave pro-Communist demonstrations alone.” While many of the Peekskill veterans remained defiant, believing they had done — in the words of the ACLU’s investigators — “their patriotic duty”, the leaders of the organizations under whose banner they had protested quickly distanced themselves from their riotous New York brethren. Craig, questioned at a New York City speaking engagement, insisted that, whatever their stated intolerance of leftist dissent, the Legion “does not propose to make martyrs of the subversive elements in the country”. Maurice Stember, the New York State adjutant for the veterans’ group, echoed the sentiments. A couple of days later, Craig was joined by Clyde Lewis, his counterpart from the VFW, for a radio interview. Neither group would “countenance illegal acts” by its members, the pair confirmed.⁷⁰

The riots were on the mind of the local veterans’ posts as well. In New Haven, Connecticut, Legionnaires petitioned governor Chester Bowles to bar any future Paul Robeson appearances in the state, with the goal of avoiding “another Peekskill incident”. The commander of the Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, Legion asked city and school officials to ban the singer’s impending appearance at a peace rally to be held in the county seat, saying “We want no Pittsburgh

⁷⁰ James F. O’Neil, “How You Can Fight Communism”, *American Legion Magazine*, August 1948, in Shrecker, *The Age of McCarthyism*, p.112; *New York Times*, 22 September 1949, p.21; *Violence in Peekskill*, Folder 39, Box 1, Peekskill Riots; *New York Times*, 26 September 1949, p.27.

incidents to be added to the Peekskill incident.” In Peekskill itself, plans for an “Americanization rally”, to take place barely a month after the disturbances, were disrupted when the local CWV post announced it was pulling out of the parade. While there was little sympathy for the victims of anticommunist violence, the major veteran groups were clearly cognizant of the public relations problems posed by further direct engagement with the massed ranks of those they considered subversive.⁷¹

There was some sympathy for the Westchester veterans in nearby Putnam County, where a Legion post commander wrote a front-page opinion piece for the local newspaper that borrowed the now-notorious “Wake Up America, Peekskill Did” slogan for its headline. “Paul Robeson has been fairly quite [sic] lately and his effectiveness as an influence has been cut down considerably,” the veteran leader opined. “Yes, here in the East and middle West the trend is down for the Communists. The affair at Peekskill [...] had a great deal to do with these events.” Commander Benziger’s impolitic op-ed highlighted a contradiction in the wider veteran movement’s disassociation of itself from the anti-Robeson protestors. The direct action taken by the Peekskill veterans did not just have its roots in the sort of spontaneously patriotic, aggressively conformist impulses one might expect in a group of recently returned World War Two veterans when threatened by a infamously “disloyal” public figure. It was shaped by their membership in organizations that, long before the height of the second red scare, had firmly defined themselves via a dogmatic intolerance of “subversive” left-

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 1 October 1949, p.15; *Ibid.*, 7 September 1949, p.34; *Ibid.*, 18 September 1949, p.48.

wing thought. For the American Legion and the VFW, red-baiting was part and parcel of a philosophy defined as “one-hundred per cent Americanism.”

The value of the Peekskill riots lies — to this thesis at least — in just this perception of events. Not that they were an aberration — the bigoted outburst of a backwards town — but rather that they were part of a wider narrative of domestic anticommunist action, and indeed perhaps the most coherent expression of such in the entire early Cold War period. The Peekskill patriots were not defending their town from dangerous subversion, whatever they may have claimed. They walked miles from their homes to breach the private sphere of a leftist cultural movement they did not comprehend, and which they had been instructed to resent — by their government and its police force, by community leaders and media voices. Authority figures maintained Paul Robeson was not simply an artist with unpopular political views, but an effective agent of an enemy power; his fans not equal citizens with different cultural habits and progressive social views, but subversives actively engaged in undermining American democracy. In this light, seeking out and attacking the Robesonites — eradicating the rats, as the *Star* editorial had it — became a duty, not a malicious impulse.

The Robeson riots were a one-off, destined to be buried in the historical memory as anomalous with the McCarthy era in which they occurred, and anachronistically pre-emptive of the violent resistance to the civil rights movement which they superficially resembled. The uniqueness of Peekskill’s experience was the result of many factors. Unlike many suburban

anticommunists, the townsfolk were engaged in a relationship with actual left-wingers, not liberals with suspiciously modern ideas about school curricula or taxation. They may not have appreciated the nuances in political outlook of their summer neighbours, but Peekskill residents were still in day-to-day contact with many thousands of fellow Americans whose views were considered in most places — not just staunchly Republican Westchester County — to be beyond the pale. Then there were the more general social factors that brought a long, hot summer to boiling point. As investigator Leo Stole put it, “Peekskill is not a ‘typical’ American community. It is a summer resort town. [The] attitude from natives to visitors is one of hostility to strangers who are temporarily in the community but not of it.” The racial diversity of the summer camp residents clearly added to their “otherness” in the eyes of Caucasian-dominated Peekskill; for all that the Jewish War Veterans officially “exonerated” their fellow protestors of bigotry (other witnesses say the JWV members were booed by those who shared their cause), racism and anti-Semitism was undoubtedly widespread amongst the grassroots anticommunist community of the town, and exacerbated its militancy.⁷²

America did “wake up” in the years following the late summer of 1949, although not in quite in the manner Peekskill had demonstrated. The mass-market media was generally critical of the two riots, even as it fingered the Robeson faction for attempted “martyrology” in provoking them or, in one particularly sour *Newsday* editorial, accused them of feeling “gypped” no one had died. The left-wing press, meanwhile, understandably claimed a pyrrhic victory: for all their broken

⁷² Stole Memorandum, Folder 42, Box 1, Peekskill Riots.

windshields and broken limbs, the concertgoers had held firm, enjoyed their summer musicale, and vastly outnumbered those who sought to break up their assembly. Neither of the two major investigative reports into the Peekskill disturbances, meanwhile, offered much in the way of encouragement for future militant counter-subversives. The ACLU's condemnation of protestors' racism and police negligence would have been easy to ignore for would-be red hunters — the American Legion regularly called for their investigation as a potentially subversive group. But, ironically, the grand jury's fulsome praise of the anti-Robesonites' cause served also to bury their actions: far from the "get out and stay-out" message some hardliners believed they had delivered, the lasting impression reading Fanelli's report is of a dramatic victory for the leftists. Indeed, this sense that the Robeson followers eventually "won" at Peekskill — shared, to varying degrees, by accounts in the liberal press, the right-wing tabloids and the pro-communist newspapers — may go a long way to explaining why the veterans' violent militancy proved a false dawn.

For a variety of reasons, subsequent attempts at mass anticommunist organizing bore little resemblance to the belligerent approach of Peekskill's patriots, despite the occasional vote of approval from conservative columnists and right-wing politicians (a Los Angeles councilman named Lloyd Davies proclaimed, "I would have been throwing rocks myself.") While it is difficult to conceive of the genteel ladies of patriotic societies like the Daughters of the American Revolution or the Minute Women of the USA ever engaging in hand-to-hand combat with unionists and progressive thinkers, even if they wanted to, the embarrassment to the counter-subversive cause perceived amid the overturned cars of Westchester

County sealed the need for a more restrained approach. The veterans' organizations — alongside the town of Peekskill itself, perhaps the institutions with the most reputational damage in the wake of the riots — were not swayed from their increasing commitment to hard-right, anticommunist politics. The American Legion and VFW continued to define themselves as nationwide red-hunting outfits. Yet the violent excesses of the Robeson protests, enabled and at least tacitly endorsed by local commanders, were never repeated. A year before Senator McCarthy's rise to prominence and far more viscerally brutal than even his most vehement rhetorical flourishes, Peekskill both predicted, and demonstrated the limits of, the absolutist logic of domestic anticommunism in the early Cold War era.⁷³

⁷³ *New York Herald Tribune*, 6 September 1949, Folder 29, Box 3, Peekskill Riots; *Newsday*, 6 September 1949, Folder 14, Box 3, Peekskill Riots; Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, p.376. Peekskill's continuing embarrassment at its association with the riots is exemplified by a letter from then city historian John Curran to the *New York Times*, printed on 27 April 1997, lamenting the geographically imprecise appellation permanently affixed to 1949's events: "If place or personality are to be the continuing identification, then 'The Town of Cortlandt Riots' or 'Robeson Riots' are certainly more accurate and appropriate."

Chapter Two

One Hundred Per Cent Americans:

The Veterans' Crusade Against Subversion

On 8 February 1954 the readers of *Pravda* were introduced to the peculiarities of life in a “typical American city” during the early Cold War. The Soviet newspaper told of a group of European journalists who had been taken on a State Department-sponsored visit to the prosperous community of Norwalk, on Connecticut’s south-western coastline, to experience “the wondrous blessings of the American way of life”. Instead of the freedom and ease of unfettered democracy, however, the guests were puzzled to find the town abuzz with an odd political scandal. The local post of the VFW — America’s oldest combat veterans’ organization — had begun investigating the citizens of Norwalk for suspect ideologies and was reporting its findings to the authorities. It was not just those who harboured radical leanings who risked falling under the microscope. “Any child knows that you don’t have to be a Communist for people to accuse you of communist activity,” one local explained to the foreign delegation. “Suppose I refuse to stand the veteran Jack Bobkins to a couple of rounds of beer; tomorrow he will denounce me to the F.B.I.” The news reporters — representatives of eight NATO countries — questioned the mayor about this peculiar state of affairs and watched bemused as national figures expressed approval, or at least indifference towards the activities of the self-appointed suburban spies. They were not surprised when the infamous senator Joseph McCarthy called the Norwalk project “an excellent idea”, but even President Eisenhower seemed to believe there was no legal reason why the local veterans

should not inform on their friends and neighbours, if they so desired. "If Norwalk is actually a typical town," the newspapermen concluded, "the U.S.A. must be a very strange country."⁷⁴

There was a degree of artistic license in *Pravda's* retelling of the European journalists' introduction to the world of grassroots American anticommunism, and not a little irony in the Soviet government mouthpiece's feigned horror at revelations of ideological surveillance, but the basic facts relayed to readers behind the Iron Curtain were true. As the newspaper deputation toured the Connecticut commuter hub, Albert Beres, a local service station owner and commander of the Norwalk VFW post, revealed the existence of a special committee to identify and "turn in" suspected local leftists. Charles Post, another VFW member who happened to be the Connecticut state head of the veterans' organization, celebrated the "careful screening" of Norwalk citizens as a means to "wake up the people in our town". The chairman of HUAC, Congressman Harold Velde, even expressed the hope that the Norwalk red-hunters would extend their reporting to the congressional counter-subversive committees as well as the FBI. At the Europeans' farewell dinner, guest speaker Edward Barrett – former Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs – was left to fret that the journalists' countrymen would "today see us as a nation that has gone off on an emotional binge of witch hunting, book burning and the like".⁷⁵

⁷⁴ *Pravda*, 8 February 1954, p.3, in *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press*, No. 6, Vol. 6, 24 March 1954, p.21.

⁷⁵ *New York Times*, 27 January 1954, p.1; *Ibid.*, 28 January 1954; *Ibid.*, 29 January 1954, p.18; *Ibid.*, 30 January 1954; *Hartford Courant*, 29 January 1954, p.23. *Ibid.*, 30 January 1954; *Ibid.*, 4 February 1954, p.10; *Ibid.*, 8 February 1954, p.1; *Hartford Courant*, 1 February 1954; *Ibid.*, 8 February 1954, p.2; *Washington Post*, 30 January 1954, p.10. Various VFW factions came out for and against the Norwalk scheme. For instance, Boston and New Mexico's state departments

Norwalk's minor international incident was one of the veterans' more high-profile grassroots contributions to red-scare politics, but the basic elements — assumed authority, hard-line resolution-making, liberal dismay and intra-community tension — were replicated repeatedly during the late forties and early fifties. For conservative factions among former servicemen and women, the influence and establishment-conferred respectability of groups like the VFW and American Legion provided the impetus to act as patriotic policemen on the Cold War home front; for others it raised the troubling spectre of "veteran vigilantes" as street-level arbiters of acceptable thought. This chapter explores the role of anticommunism in the identity and philosophy of the major veterans' organizations during the early Cold War. It looks at both the rhetoric employed and the practical measures proposed on the national stage. It goes on to interrogate the extent to which official policy was adopted, adapted or ignored at a local level, with particular focus on veteran posts in and around metropolitan Los Angeles and New York City. It asks what the red scare meant for an ordinary member of a veterans' organization, how it shaped his politics, and in what ways he brought his ideology to bear on his community.

Several historians have observed that conservative veterans' organizations contributed to the growth of postwar anticommunism in the United States but

endorsed it, while Iowa's opposed it. In Connecticut itself, posts both backed and rejected Norwalk's action. Amid mounting national controversy, however, Beres and his comrades soon performed an audacious U-turn. After reporting that the committee was formed and the naming process well underway, they suddenly began — following the lead of Auxiliary member and local anticommunist personality Suzanne Silvercruys Stevenson — denying the programme had ever existed in the first place. It had all been a misunderstanding: a single member had uncovered a politically suspicious neighbour, but was too "timid" to report him to the FBI himself. The post leaders had simply stepped in on this one occasion. Anything else was a liberal media myth.

there is no scholarly consensus on the precise function or relative importance of these groups. Nor is there much consideration of the reasons behind the veterans' commitment to the red-baiting cause. After all, while there is nothing remarkable in the fact that former soldiers should be passionate about ideas of patriotism and loyalty, it does not automatically follow that their civic groups and lobbying representatives should be so brazenly political in promoting these ideas, much less attempt to operate as an extra-legal enforcer of them.

Michael Kazin in *The Populist Persuasion* lists the ex-service groups as allies of the post-war right, with particular consideration of the privileged position from which they embraced the partisan politics of red-hunting: "Organized military veterans could engage in the most viciously ad hominem campaigns against 'subversives' with the confidence that their right, even their duty, to speak for the nation as a whole could not be challenged". He also distinguishes between the (relatively) moderate interest the "more working-class, locally focused membership" of the VFW took in red-related issues when compared with their more fanatical Legion brethren, whose "impact was akin to that of a battleship sailing into combat with all guns blazing." Richard Gid Powers offers a qualified vindication of the Legion's rightist zeal, arguing that they "tried to present the more responsible of the countersubversives" in their various patriotic conferences and rallies, but that the ever-expanding red scare "opened the door" for "conspiracy-minded" activists to march under the same banner. These irresponsible counter-subversives, to use Powers' formulation, were often hangovers from the pre-war anti-Semitic far right, and sullied the noble

intentions of initiatives such as the Legion's All-American Conference to Combat Communism.⁷⁶

As far as accounts specifically focused on the major veterans groups are concerned, these veer from the predictably hagiographic — the various authorized texts, such as Thomas Rumer's *Official History of the American Legion* — to the aggressively disparaging (William Gellerman's 1938 screed *The American Legion as Educator*, which basically depicted the veterans' organization as a fascist front, was a progenitor). More useful is Rodney Minott's *Peerless Patriots*, a scholarly attempt to trace the ideals and reality of the various versions of veterans' Americanism, from "passionate repressiveness" on the right to the more "responsible American spiritualism" advocated by liberal factions. Justin Gray's partisan journalistic account of his own indoctrination into conservative Legion politics — *The Inside Story of the Legion* — is both illuminating and prescient, having been published a year or two prior to the heyday of veterans' counter-subversion.⁷⁷

Of all the anticommunist organizations operating in America during the early Cold War, the American Legion might most legitimately claim the elusive title "mass movement". It was, by any standards, a mass membership organization,

⁷⁶ Alan F. Westin, "The John Birch Society: 'Radical Right' and 'extreme Left' in the Political Context of Post World War II", in Bell ed., *Radical Right*, p.222; Kovel, *Red Hunting in the Promised Land*, pp.93-99; Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), pp.178-183; Powers, *Not Without Honor*, p.262; Heale, *American Anticommunism*, p.174.

⁷⁷ Thomas A. Rumer, *The American Legion: An Official History 1919-1989* (New York: M Evans and Co., 1990); Cauter, *The Great Fear*; Fried, *The Russians Are Coming! The Russians Are Coming!*; Justin Gray, *The Inside Story of the Legion* (New York: Boni and Gaer, 1948); Rodney G. Minott, *Peerless Patriots: Organized Veterans and the Spirit of Americanism* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1962); William Gellerman, *The American Legion as Educator* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1938).

consisting of over seventeen thousand local posts. By the mid-1950s, some three-and-a-half million former soldiers, of all classes and social standing, were dues-paying members in what was — at a local and national level — a body increasingly defined by its devotion to McCarthyite goals. Another million made up the Legion's Women's Auxiliary. The next largest veterans' organization — the VFW — counted a combined million-and-a-half among its main group and auxiliary and followed a similarly anti-leftist party line. These men and women elected delegates and leaders who passed resolutions calling for the outlawing of communism and the imprisoning of its advocates, lobbied government to enact red-hunting measures, and worked with the FBI on questions of policy.

Yet such structural anticommunism must be weighed against the reality that neither the Legion nor the VFW presented itself as primarily counter-subversive. They were respectable, powerful social organizations and lobbying fronts with a stated goal of fighting the corner of former soldiers — and it must be assumed that many members joined with just these benefits in mind. There is no reason to conflate tacit acceptance of the more stridently political elements of the veterans' groups' activism (as parceled with myriad other non-partisan pursuits) with subscription to a right-wing anticommunist ideology. Indeed, it was possible to be actively opposed to the veterans' conservatism while still opting to enroll in one of the most influential institutions in the nation; to recognize — as did Legion whistleblower Justin Gray — that the organization best capable of delivering the “tall order” of solving the housing, employment and social requirements of the recently returned war veteran was the largest such advocacy group. For all their potentially divisive politics, the established nature

of the Legion and the VFW ensured that recruitment during the fruitful post-war years vastly outstripped that of newly formed bodies like AMVETS or the liberalism-focused American Veterans Committee.⁷⁸

These new members had many motivations for joining one of the big two veterans' collectives — from the opportunity of sharing war stories over a beer in their town's VFW-owned bar or Legion-run bowling alley onwards. Indeed, Samuel Stouffer's 1954 study found that new members of the Legion and the VFW demonstrated far more tolerance of "non-conformists" than did their older comrades. Forty-three per cent of Legion or VFW-affiliated World War Two veterans fell into Stouffer's category of "more tolerant", compared to only twenty-four per cent of those who fought in World War One — suggesting not only was the promotion of strict Americanism a primary concern for only a portion of the major organizations' membership, but also that there was significant generational division within the veteran rank-and-file over the importance of anticommunism.⁷⁹

Nevertheless, the veterans must be considered in an examination of the grassroots anticommunist right during the early Cold War. On numerous occasions, in posts all over the country, Legionnaires and VFW members went beyond conformist notions of loyalty and small-c conservatism to share platforms with overtly anticommunist groups. They did so on all manner of issues under the broad rubric of counter-subversion: from movie censorship to

⁷⁸ Justin Gray, *The Inside Story of the Legion*, p.22.

⁷⁹ Stouffer, *Communism, Conformity and Civil Liberties*, p. 235.

anti-UN campaigns. Stouffer found that tolerance levels for non-affiliated veterans were markedly higher than for those who wore the uniform of one of the big two — fifty-two and thirty-nine per cent of independent World War Two and One vets respectively were classed “more tolerant”. Moreover, the organizations of the Legion and the VFW as a whole represented a unique link between the anticommunist establishment and community-level activists.⁸⁰

The American Legion was formed in 1919 and its members were involved in anti-left struggles from the outset. That same year, in Centralia, Washington, Legionnaires attacked members of the Industrial Workers of the World in an incident that became known as the Centralia Massacre: four Legion men were killed in the assault on the unionists’ hall, and an arrested IWW member was dragged from his jail cell and lynched later that night. The Legion earned a reputation as a strikebreaking outfit, with close links to the pro-industry lobbying organization the National Association of Manufacturers, and as a body willing to apply militaristic methods to domestic concerns. In Denver, also in 1919, Legionnaires served as an extra-legal police force and challenged picket lines during a streetcar workers’ industrial action. The newly formed ACLU in 1921 counted fifty acts of violence committed in the name of the Legion, including the whipping of a newspaper editor and the beating of four men at a Farmers Non-Partisan League meeting. By the early 1930s, the group’s patriotic, anti-left activities began to assume their defining, proto-McCarthyite shape. Under former postman Homer Chaillaux, the Legion developed its National Americanism Commission: top of the agenda was compiling a file on every

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

American it considered subversive. This project began in 1935, and by the time of the Cold War it boasted an expansive documentary record of supposedly un-American associations. Which end of the political spectrum roused loyalty concerns for the Legion can be seen in the following statement from its *Americanism Manual*: “Within the United States there is at the present time no strongly organized Fascist movement. Whatever may be the case in the future, the sole and most dangerous threat to our security today is from the world Communist conspiracy.”⁸¹

Chaillaux remained in charge of the Legion’s Americanist endeavours for more than a decade, but his death in 1945 meant he did not see the programme reach its apex in the favourable conditions of post-war America. The cessation of hostilities provided hundreds of thousands of new, young recruits, ideally suited for a crusade against communism that had been given new impetus and mainstream legitimacy by world events. At the Legion’s 1946 national convention, delegates heard what Thomas Rumer describes as J. Edgar Hoover’s “rousing attack on Communism in the United States” and ratified a new \$250,000 appropriation for Chaillaux’s old programme, significantly expanding its scope and ambition.⁸²

The new mood of anticommunist fervour was seen in pronouncements from successive national commanders, elected each year to a twelve-month term by national conference delegates but widely considered pre-ordained by influential

⁸¹ *Americanism Manual* (Indianapolis: American Legion, 1951), p.48; Minott, *Peerless Patriots*, p.58. See Minott’s book or Gray’s *The Inside Story of the Legion* for detailed accounts of the founding of the Legion, and the development of its concept of Americanism.

⁸² Rumer, *The American Legion*, p.305.

backroom “kingmakers”. In Spring 1946, a year before the establishment of the Truman Doctrine, Legion head Paul Griffith framed the battle against international communism in starkly militaristic terms: “Our [...] efforts resulted in the crushing of the monstrous pagan evils of Nazism, fascism, Nipponism by force of arms. Today a new evil ideology is rising in the world.” His successor, former police chief James O’Neil, sold Legionnaires on the need to outlaw the Communist Party and deport any foreign nationals in its ranks, tighten border controls and speed up the congressional loyalty investigations, and arrest and prosecute leading party members for treason — “to show the Communists that we mean business”.⁸³

While there was a degree of symbolic grandstanding in these hard-line resolutions, they were no mere posture of superpatriotism. The Legion prided itself on its powerful lobbying abilities, and boasted a truly national network of influence — from magazines and newsletters to a weekly radio show broadcast on more than seven hundred stations by the late forties. Gray notes that in 1946 nearly half of all US senators and congressmen were Legion members, along with twenty-six governors, five cabinet members, three Supreme Court justices, the Attorney General and, for good measure, President Truman himself.⁸⁴

Truman enjoyed a long, occasionally fraught, relationship with the organized veterans’ movement over his political career. A “great joiner”, the future

⁸³ *Washington Post*, 30 March 1947, p.M11; *Ibid.*, 20 August 1947, p.21; *Daily Boston Globe*, 1 September 1947, p.1; *New York Times*, 13 October 1947, p.48; *Los Angeles Times*, 17 November 1947, p.1.

⁸⁴ *Daily Boston Globe*, 21 October 1948, p.1; *New York Times*, 21 October 1948, p.1; Gray, *The Inside Story of the Legion*, p.99.

politician signed up for the newly formed American Legion not long after completing his First World War service, adding Legion membership to an extra-curricular résumé that included the Elks, the Eagles, the Freemasons, the International Acquaintance League, the VFW and the Officers' Reserve Corps. He helped organize the Legion's national convention in his home state of Missouri — enlisting Boy Scouts to promote a “tag your home with a flag drive” to one hundred thousand Kansas City residents — and, a year later, launched his own political career with considerable help from his veteran cohorts. According to biographer David McCullough, some three hundred “foot-stamping” Legionnaires turned out in Lee's Summit, Missouri, for the unveiling of Truman's campaign as “ostensibly [...] the American Legion candidate” for County Court Judge in eastern Jackson County.⁸⁵

Clearly still cognizant of the veterans' power to shape political fortunes twenty-five years later, Truman sought to prove his mettle as a Cold Warrior with major foreign policy speeches to audiences of ex-servicemen. At the 1948 Legion national convention the president made the case for a patient approach to dealing with the Soviet Union that acknowledged the possibility of mutual dialogue and co-existence. He recalled in his memoirs that the reaction from delegates had been “surprisingly warm” (the *New York Times* noted, in contrast, that perennial GOP presidential candidate Harold Stassen had drawn rousing cheers at the same event for insisting peace would not be won via a “Mission to Moscow”). The next year, Truman unveiled plans for a Europe-wide military

⁸⁵ David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), p.191 and p.161; Alonzo L. Hamby, *Man of the People: A Life of Harry S. Truman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 88-89.

assistance programme and the creation of NATO at the VFW's national encampment. If the long-time Legionnaire felt relatively at ease delivering a message of liberal foreign policy interventionism to his fellow veterans in 1949, his statement of Cold War domestic ideals under the gathering clouds of McCarthyism — delivered two years later at the opening of the Legion's new Washington headquarters — spoke to a widening gulf between the Democratic establishment and the conservative anticommunist movement. Truman wrapped a vivid rebuke of McCarthyite counter-subversion inside a tribute to the Legion's Americanist programme, but few present could have missed the uncomfortable truth that the president's interpretation of the policy — "Real Americanism means that we will protect freedom of speech [and] defend the right of people to say what they think, regardless of how much we may disagree with them" — diverged strongly from the veterans' version. Without mentioning the Legion's un-American activities investigations by name, Truman insisted that Americanism "is being undermined by some people in this country who are loudly proclaiming that they are its chief defenders". If there was any doubt his nationally broadcast criticisms of McCarthyism were also intended as home truths for at least of some those who shared his Legion affiliation, Truman confirmed as much in a letter to former Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes a few days later, explaining, "The platform was half-filled with fascists and I was talking to them more than anybody else".⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Merle Miller, *Plain Speaking: An Oral Biography of Harry S. Truman* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1974), pp.231-36; *New York Times*, 21 October 1948, p.1; *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Harry S Truman: Containing the Public Messages, Speeches and Statements of the President January 1 to December 31 1951* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1965), no.191; Hamby, *Man of the People*, pp.566-67.

Truman's attack on the politics of domestic counter-subversion was problematic in itself (as *New Republic* pointed out, many of the critiques applied equally to loyalty programmes endorsed by the president) but it served to highlight the rhetorical, if not always practical, chasm between the liberal version of anticommunism and the conservative interpretation increasingly subscribed to by the veterans. Similarly symbolic was the decision of Korean War Commander and soon-to-be champion for the red-hunting right General Douglas MacArthur to publicly assail the president's military decision-making — sending Truman into a “cold fury” and inviting his own dismissal in the process — via a letter to the VFW national encampment of 1951. In a way, Truman's ideological estrangement from the organized veterans' movement reflected the manner in which the grassroots right had wrested the iconography of populist nationalism from liberals during the early Cold War — on artwork displayed by the Legion's National Security Committee at their 1954 convention, the one-time patriotic decorator of Kansas City had become a figure mockingly aligned with the Soviet Union.⁸⁷

For liberal anticommunists, even those with as solid Legion credentials as Harry Truman, there was no reconciling the values of free speech and internationalism with the Americanist imperative to “eliminate the enemy termites in our midst”, as articulated by national commander George Craig in 1949. The macho rhetoric demonstrated the ongoing tension between the Legion's desire to be seen as a respectable red-hunting body that rejected vigilantism — as evidenced by Craig's

⁸⁷ *New Republic*, April 1952, quoted in *Ibid.*; Miller, *Plain Speaking*, p.291; *New York Times*, 1 September 1954, p.29. The paintings, which also depicted the British Empire and the World War Two lend-lease programme as allies of the USSR, were eventually removed from display following complaints.

condemnation of the Peekskill rioters just two months earlier — and the need to luridly incite anti-left sentiment among its rank-and-file (a Legionnaire might reasonably ask what other way there was of eliminating termites if not violently). Craig further demonstrated his fondness for zoological metaphors at a meeting of Chicago health insurers a few months later, describing the “weevils of socialism” as allies of the “termites of communism”, with both having already infested the “snake pit” of the State Department. The commander’s speech was notable for its willingness to extend partisan, conservative policy well beyond the issue of counter-subversion — socialized medicine, he told the private health industry representatives, was “bad medicine” supported by “crackpot do-gooders” in Washington who were leading the US towards communism.⁸⁸

Nineteen-fifty saw the unveiling of a new Legion committee with a remit to enforce the recently passed McCarran Internal Security Act’s demand that communists sign in with the Attorney General. National Commander Erle Cocke explained that the committee would work with the FBI and Legion-founded All American Conference to Combat Communism to help round up those leftists who “contemptuously refused to register”. Again, it would be tempting to see bravado in the Legion’s self-appointed status as national security enforcers, were it not for the cordial relations between its upper echelons and the anticommunist establishment, notably J. Edgar Hoover and his FBI colleagues. One of the first men Justin Gray meets during his introduction to life at the Legion’s Indianapolis base is the “affable” and “dapper” Lee Pennington, Hoover’s Chief Investigator:

⁸⁸ *Los Angeles Times*, 30 August 1949, p.8; *Ibid.*, 4 November 1949, p.8, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 17 May 1950, p.10.

“He stood mopping his brow and complaining humorously, ‘I really ought to be on the Legion payroll, I’m out here so often.’” By the mid-1950s, Pennington *was* on the Legion payroll, employed as an Americanism director following his FBI retirement. Similarly, it was claimed by participants that the AACCC occasionally sent officers to meet with members of the various congressional investigating committees, both to keep activists abreast of ongoing probes and, more surprisingly, to relay to congressmen “the reaction of Conference organizations to current or contemplated investigations”. Whether the investigators ever acted upon these recommendations is unclear, but even the acknowledgement of discussions on such grounds is revealing: amateur anticommunists, particularly those with the respectability conferred by veterans’ organization membership, were rewarded and encouraged by official-level sanction.⁸⁹

Each year brought new heights of counter-subversive fervour. Evidence of the Soviet-led conspiracy was found in “religion, education, community affairs, labor, government and organizations such as the YMCA [and] YWCA”; calls were made for the prosecution of the ACLU and the disbarring of the Rosenbergs’ attorney. Even the Girl Scouts were not safe from the Legion’s laser-like focus on domestic subversion: A 1954 resolution urged the “terminati[on of] the attempted infiltration” of the venerable children’s organization. Delegates also lined up

⁸⁹ The McCarran Act grew out of another Legion-backed initiative, the Mundt-Nixon Bill. Along with the imperative for “subversive groups” to register with the government, it restricted the movement of suspect foreign nationals and was described by President Truman in his attempted veto as “a long step toward totalitarianism”; *Los Angeles Times*, 20 November 1950, p.19; Minott, *Peerless Patriots*, p.96; Gray, *The Inside Story of the Legion*, p.210; All-American Conference to Combat Communism notes, Folder 59, Box 4, Right-Wing Pamphlets.

alongside patriotic and hard-line rightist groups such as the Minute Women of the USA by opposing UNESCO's schools programmes.⁹⁰



Image 11: *American Legion Magazine*, June 1950 and February 1949.

The Legion conveyed its anticommunist message to members via an extensive media empire. The monthly *American Legion Magazine* was a glossy, general interest journal that borrowed the sentimental aesthetic of Norman Rockwell's *Saturday Evening Post* covers — all-American families led by clean-cut white men — and modelled itself on the mainstream, lifestyle publications of the day. It ran short stories, poems, cartoons, sports features, articles on army matters, and patriotic sermons. It also provided a platform for staunchly red-baiting polemicists such as Irene Corbally Kuhn, J. B. Matthews and Louis Budenz. Kuhn's June 1952 article "Your Child is their Target" became a key text for educational activists seeking to rid local school curricula of "progressive

⁹⁰ *Washington Post*, 4 September 1953, p.22; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 3 September 1954, p.1.

education” and other menaces, and threatened the Legion’s traditionally close ties with the National Education Association (for thirty years the two bodies had cooperated on schools advocacy initiative American Education Week). The piece claimed that the “hierarchy” of the NEA was “one of the strongest forces today in propagandizing for a socialistic America” and accused the association of hiring “goon squads” to discredit local campaigners against progressive educational reform. The *New York Times* stated it was all that the NEA leaders could do to prevent delegates at its national convention declaring open war on the Legion by issuing an official censure of the organization. Typical *American Legion Magazine* articles of the early Cold War era covered the psychology of communists (as in Benjamin Gitlow’s “What Makes Them Commies”) and the necessity of on-campus red hunting (Budenz’s “Do Colleges *Have* to Hire Red Professors?”) — alongside more everyday issues such as life-improving possibilities of quality headgear (“Check Your Hat!”).⁹¹

The eager counter-subversive could also subscribe to the Legion’s more directly campaigning newsletters, such as *Summary of Trends and Developments* and, later, the more snappily titled *Firing Line*. The latter title debuted in January 1952 as a four-page, biweekly notice of “Facts for Fighting Communism”, costing three dollars a year for a subscription. The pamphlet covered international issues, local Legion campaigns, and included supplemental sheets bearing lists of the supposed affiliations of suspect public figures. A March 1953 issue of *Firing Line*, for example, offered a bulletin on the continued picketing of the film

⁹¹ Reprint from *American Legion Magazine*, June 1952, Folder 206, Box 13, Right-Wing Pamphlets; *New York Times*, 3 July 1952, p.27. Victor Lasky ed., *The American Legion Reader* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1953); *American Legion Magazine*, November 1950, Folder 262, Box 9, Right-Wing Pamphlets.

Limelight, directed by red-baited Hollywood star Charlie Chaplin. It also carried an approving piece on the counter-protesting of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg supporters in New York (“Their signs read: ‘Pres. Eisenhower — Give Ethel the Gas!’ — ‘No Mercy to Traitors’”) and a report on the plight of Professor Kenneth Colegrove, newly of Queens College and supposedly shunned by some of his colleagues for having testified against China expert and McCarthy victim Owen Lattimore. Regional Legion departments also published anticommunist literature, notably the influential *Spotlight* pamphlet out of Syracuse, New York.⁹²

The local-level anticommunist actions recounted in the newsletters highlight a key problem in understanding the Legion’s Americanist and counter-subversive nature: the extent to which the behaviour of individual posts reflected official American Legion policy, and vice versa. The official party line on the question of community-level engagement is illuminatingly covered in Robert Pitkin’s 1953 *American Legion Magazine* article “The Movies and the American Legion”: “[T]he Legion has never suggested that any Post picket any picture. On the other hand, it does not ask Posts not to picket.” Pitkin explained that the national leadership was “bound by convention mandate to publish information that indicates Communist connections on the part of entertainers,” and that any reaction to the dissemination of these accusations by rank-and-file Legionnaires was simply a reflection of how a Hollywood figure’s “record sits” — not with seasoned conservative campaigners but — “with the folks on Main Street”.⁹³

⁹² *Firing Line*, 1 March 1952.

⁹³ Lasky ed., *American Legion Reader*, p.144.

The reality of the extent to which the Legion expected its members to operate as foot soldiers in its counter-subversive crusade was expressed in the *Manual of the Americanism* programme: “Exposing and continuously combating all forms of subversion is the *first* obligation of every Legionnaire.” The programme’s mission — “To foster and perpetuate a one hundred per cent Americanism” — was a multi-faceted affair, seemingly as much concerned with sundry patriotic quandaries, such as correct flag etiquette and the proper use of bunting as it was combating communist infiltration. A full Americanism calendar for an individual Legion post included accident prevention and fire safety demonstrations for the local community, citizenship classes for new immigrants, youth sporting competitions ranging from baseball to model aeroplane flying, and many more activities beside — all of which competed for time, resources and enthusiasm with the battle against un-American ideologies. In reality, such an extensive programme was far from universal: posts ranged greatly in terms of size and the nature of their membership, and prioritized their efforts accordingly. Tellingly, individual Americanism committees were instructed to compile annual reports of their actions prior to each national convention, with a distinguished service citation on offer for the post with the most impressive record, and an Americanism citation for all who showed sufficient commitment to the programme — suggesting both that the national Legion was relatively unaware of goings on at a community level, and that local-level participation in counter-subversion was by no means a certainty.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ *Americanism Manual*, pp.49-51. My italics.

For those posts that did embrace the un-American activities portion of the Americanism project, the guiding principle was to “identif[y] and properly quarantine” communists, so that their “virus-spreading danger can be reduced to nil”. The specific instructions on how to do this shared a spirit with the tactics adopted by many grassroots anticommunist organizations, and promoted in the various guidebooks to community activism. Above all else was the imperative to further one’s education in counter-subversion. Partly through practical ease, partly as a self-sustaining measure, subscribing to, reading, and redistributing ever more anticommunist literature was the fundamental plank of most grassroots programmes. This was justified as a means of countering a conspiracy built on lies and misinformation, as well as a preventative against embarrassing incidents of over-eager or misdirected finger-pointing — “Don’t go off half-cocked”, as the *Americanism Manual* warned — but it also can be viewed as a somewhat realistic response to the mundane realities of neighbourhood red-hunting. Outside of the major metropolitan areas, hard evidence of the worldwide communist conspiracy — however loosely defined — was thin on the ground in 1950. Instructing members to “[s]ecure the Legion’s reading list and subscribe to as many publications as you can afford” was a means to keep the rank-and-file enthused about the counter-subversive cause, when opportunities for (legal) practical action were scarce.⁹⁵

That said, there were many more hands-on pursuits for local Americanism committees to engage in. Generally these involved the condemnation (or “exposure”) of nationally known fellow travelers, via letters to local newspapers

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

and phone calls to local radio stations, as well as the sending of supportive missives to anti-red politicians. Conversely, Legionnaires were cautioned against activities they *should not* undertake: indiscriminate name-calling and the sort of “vigilante” action perceived by many at Peekskill. The balance between “Dos” and “Don’ts” highlighted a core problem for community anticommunists, particularly those who, like the Legion, aspired to respectable, establishment-friendly status: the need to maintain a rhetoric that convinced recruits they really were the home-front against a diabolical, existential threat and a reality that did not alienate moderates or stray into militant illegality. It was a delicate balancing act that coloured much of the grassroots activities carried out in the Legion’s name during the early Cold War period.⁹⁶

Some of the earliest counter-subversive actions prosecuted on a local level by the post-World War Two American Legion were introspective. In 1946 the New York Department refused to make permanent the temporary charter of the 275-strong Duncan-Paris Post, citing the presence of communists among its membership. The post, one of many formed by the new generation of younger World War Two veteran Legionnaires, was populated by writers, including future Fifth Amendment martyr Dashiell Hammett. State Adjutant Maurice Stember told the *New York Times* the reasons for the en-masse dismissal of the Duncan-Paris Legionnaires but declined to inform the members themselves, or grant them a hearing.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *New York Times*, 13 September 1946, p.4.

In Peoria, Illinois, in 1947, the all-African American Rob B. Tisdell post had its charter revoked after a dispute over a proposed Paul Robeson concert in the town. White Legionnaires, inspired by reports that the performer had recently dedicated a song to German communist Gerhart Eisler, led a protest warning of “subversive” propaganda in their community. The city of Peoria duly refused to issue a permit for the recital. When Clifford Hazelwood, the commander of the Tisdell post, spoke out in support of Robeson in his role as a member of a separate citizens’ committee, he found his post’s hall padlocked and his 113 fellow black veterans thrown out of the organization, accused of bringing “the good name of the American Legion into disrepute”.⁹⁸

On issues of race, the Legion’s vision of one hundred per cent Americanism did not always fully encompass the seventeen per cent of Americans who were not native-born whites. At a national level, the organization was, according to Minott, the most prominent of those veterans’ groups and patriotic societies who cheered on the evacuation and internment of Japanese-Americans during World War Two. It was also largely opposed to immigration and vigorously supported the 1952 McCarran-Walter Immigration Act, which restricted incoming migrants according to ethnic preferences. On the local front, African-American players in the Legion’s celebrated junior baseball leagues, no matter how talented, would invariably miss out should their team reach the tournament finals. These showcases were held in southern mill towns, where the largest crowds could be expected, and northern teams would be forced to drop their black players to

⁹⁸ *New York Times*, 5 February 1947, p.16; *Richmond Afro American*, 3 May 1947, p.1; *Washington Post*, 14 August 1947, p.4; *Pittsburgh Press*, 30 August 1947, p.2; *Los Angeles Times*, 14 February 1947.

conform to local restrictions. The language used to attack communists over their support for civil rights also occasionally veered into race-baiting territory. According to *Firing Line*, for instance, Paul Robeson was the Communist Party's "leading Negro exhibit and prize catch". Perhaps unsurprisingly, southern Legion departments evidenced pro-segregation beliefs during the fifties, including the Georgia Legion's presenting of its Americanism award to white supremacist Arkansas governor Orval Faubus.⁹⁹

The more paranoid, anti-world government tendency in some anticommunist activities also brought Legionnaires into contact with anti-Semitic far-right factions. In August 1952, the *Hollywood Legionnaire* — the official publication of the Hollywood American Legion post — noted that the "United Nations flag is in the same colors as that of the Zionist State" and posited political Zionism as one of "three servitudes" that would ultimately destroy the "Christian West". After Jewish post members complained, the newsletter issued an apology and its editor resigned. When the Legion's National Executive responded to the Americanism Commission's long held complaint that UNESCO was subversive and launched an investigation, it found various Legion posts utilizing anti-UN material written by far-right conspiracists such as Joseph Kamp and Conde McGinley, publisher of neo-Nazi newspaper *Common Sense*. All of this is not to say that the Legion as a whole endorsed a bigoted line: as a mass membership movement with limited central control over the actions of individual posts, incidences of anti-Semitic or racist activities at a local level were more representative of trends of prejudice across the nation than specific to the

⁹⁹ Minott, *Peerless Patriots*, p.82 and p.103; *Firing Line*, 15 July 1952.

organized veteran movement. Nevertheless, the national headquarters was revealingly more tolerant of far-right “un-Americanism” than of disloyalty on the left.¹⁰⁰

The most famous of all the Legion’s anticommunist campaigns was probably its involvement in the Hollywood blacklist, where they were “foremost among the pressure groups baying for blood”, according to David Cate. The Legion’s contribution to the movie industry’s purges was a multifarious affair, one that is particularly useful in illuminating the hierarchical complexities of its contribution to grassroots counter-subversion: from high level cooperation between veterans’ leaders and studio bosses, to ordinary Legionnaires parading outside cinemas with banners denouncing the work of leftists being screened within.¹⁰¹

Four years on from the initial flurry of motion picture industry self-censorship over the communist issue — the December 1947 Waldorf Statement — and eight months after the resumption of film business HUAC hearings, a December 1951 *American Legion Magazine* story by J. B. Matthews asked “Did the Movies Really Clean House?” and found that, at least by the Legion’s exacting standards of Americanism, they most definitely had not. According to *American Legion Magazine* publisher James O’Neil, the piece was a deliberate, public manifestation of the Legion’s October 1951 national convention demand that “all posts, in the interest of national security [...] condemn, expose, and combat” any

¹⁰⁰ Minott, *Peerless Patriots*, p.107; *Williams Intelligence Survey*, November 1952, Folder 55, Box 4, Right-Wing Pamphlets.

¹⁰¹ Cate, *The Great Fear*, p.502.

remaining suspect entertainment industry figures “and the productions in which they have a part”.¹⁰²

Matthews’ article spelled out the Legion’s objections to Hollywood left-wingers, explaining that their existence allowed communists to “tap the fantastically high salaries of filmdom in order to fill the treasury of treason [...] put the touch of glamor upon the ugly face of Communist sedition [and] smuggle the Communist Party line [...] into the scripts of motion pictures”. He methodically listed each film featuring the work of suspect performers or production staff awaiting either completion or release. The incriminating projects were catalogued by studio. Twentieth Century Fox, for instance, had nine such films on its schedule, ranging from the musical *On the Riviera* to *The Desert Fox*, a biopic of German Field Marshal Erwin Rommel (the suspect contributor here was veteran theatre actor Luther Adler, presumably hard at work glamorizing the communist cause in his role as Adolf Hitler). For every picture, Matthews provided a brief description of its current release status, along with the un-American associations of its participants — ranging from alleged CP membership to a signature on one of the petitions or advertisements denouncing the blacklisting procedure. The article concluded that, while the congressional investigations and the Waldorf Statement signaled Hollywood’s intention to purge itself of leftism, only a few named subversives had actually lost their jobs. As for the Legion’s intended response to this state of affairs, Matthews sounded an ominous note: “Only an

¹⁰² “Investigation of so-called ‘blacklisting’ in entertainment industry: Report of the Fund for the Republic, Inc., Hearings”, available at http://www.archive.org/stream/investigationofs0156unit/investigationofs0156unit_djvu.txt; *American Legion Magazine*, December 1951, quoted in *Ibid.*

aroused public opinion is likely to exert the necessary pressure to cleanse Hollywood of all Communist influence".¹⁰³

Panicked studio bosses swiftly legitimized the allegations by requesting a meeting with the Legion's national commander at the time, Donald Wilson. Representatives from seven major studios went to see Wilson and O'Neil in March 1952, along with officials from the smaller Republic Pictures and cinema chain Loew's, and Motion Picture Producers Association president Eric Johnston. It was not the first occasion that the film industry had endorsed the Legion's role in policing patriotism. In 1947, following the Waldorf declaration, Johnston conferred with then national commander O'Neil. This time, however, the strength of the Legion's hand was evidenced both by the meeting's high profile attendance list and the power it conferred on the veterans. Wilson and O'Neil supplied the studios with documentation relating to several hundred "reds". The film bosses, evidently keen not to attempt a large-scale purge of bankable talent, proposed methods by which those named might redeem themselves in the eyes of the Legion. It was agreed that the accused could compose a statement recanting past associations or otherwise explaining their presence on the lists of fellow travelers, and that the veterans' organization would distribute the typed mea culpa among its membership. Thus the American Legion formally entered what liberal critics termed the entertainment industry's "clearance racket".¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*; Cate, *The Great Fear*, p.503.

Over the years, the Legion repeatedly denied it formed part of any such racket — in the sense of a network of self-styled experts who both defined the crime of un-Americanism and the means by which the accused could atone for their sins. They did so most notably at a 1956 HUAC hearing based around a Fund for the Republic report into the business of anticommunist “clearance”. However, to read James O’Neil’s definition of his group’s role — offering “rehabilitation” services, but never clearance — the divergence between what the Legion provided to Hollywood employees and their bosses and a clearance racket seems primarily semantic. It was a “flat lie” that the veterans’ Americanism officers were in the business of “bringing damning indictments” and then “exercis[ing] the power to heal the wound”, O’Neil told HUAC. Rather, they had helped “reestablish a climate of employment for the innocent, the stupid, and the repentant guilty in the entertainment industry, principally in Hollywood.”¹⁰⁵

Clearance or otherwise, the so-called “letterwriting campaign” mooted at the March 1952 conference eventually “rehabilitated” some one hundred actors, scriptwriters and directors, according to O’Neil. The publisher helped dispense the various statements to departments and posts around the country, though he insisted the autonomous local branches were under no obligation as to how to respond to the missives they received. Beginning with a statement such as “I recognize that my name has been associated with subversive organizations”, the letter writer was expected to explain away affiliations and, the *Nation* claimed, name others who had facilitated their connection to communist causes. A follow-up article in *American Legion Magazine* two years later suggested that

¹⁰⁵ “Investigation of so-called ‘blacklisting’ in entertainment industry”.

only around a dozen letters were able to convince Legion posts that the author had appeared on the Legion's lists by mistake, while the remainder could be divided into those one-time Hollywood subversives "willing to speak up frankly, whom the studios can now defend against criticism", and others who the "studios can't defend, because they have let the record *as it appears* be the final record". The main weapon wielded by ordinary Legionnaires against those who failed to provide a sufficiently groveling confessional, or refused to write a letter at all, was the organized boycott.¹⁰⁶

There was no official directive from Indianapolis telling the rank-and-file whether they should picket a specific film screening in their town, but when individual posts adopted this measure against productions listed in the *American Legion Magazine* piece, it met with at least tacit approval. In April 1952 *Firing Line* reported on the "[b]iggest newsstory from the home-front against communism" — the picketing of a cinema screening *Death of a Salesman* by Washington, D.C., Legionnaires — with undisguised glee. As well as detailing the economic impact of the nightly protest (a forty per cent drop in box office takings, according to the movie house's manager), the Legion newsletter warned that "movie theater owners and exhibitors" nationwide should "protect themselves" by rejecting tainted films.¹⁰⁷

The threat of a mass, grassroots boycott campaign was taken seriously by a movie business in the grip of an economic downturn and unused to such

¹⁰⁶ *The Nation*, 8 April 2009, available at <http://www.thenation.com/article/hollywood-meets-frankenstein>.

¹⁰⁷ *Firing Line*, 1 April 1952.

confrontational tactics. According to *Variety* following the *Death of a Salesman* protest, “The mere appearance of pickets outside a theater is murder on business in many areas [...] Under such circumstances, any film would be fated for a quick commercial demise”. Sure enough, a month later *Firing Line* reported that the film version of Arthur Miller’s play had been pulled from its St. Louis, Missouri, run following another case of “Legion picketitis”. Meanwhile, in Maryland, the department leaders instructed individual posts to set up “special picketing committees” with the intention of driving every one of the forty-plus new releases listed by J. B. Matthews out of their state. While male Legionnaires contacted cinema owners to forewarn them of direct action and demonstrated with placards and leaflets outside objectionable screenings, Auxiliary members formed “telephone brigades” to warn mothers statewide of the danger to children and families who might unwittingly stumble into a showing of *Cyrano de Bergerac* starring blacklisted actor José Ferrer. The Auxiliary’s phone line cadres attracted support from elsewhere in the burgeoning female-led community anticommunist network: the Maryland branch of the Minute Women of the USA offered to team up with the Legion women in the endeavour after hearing about it on a Baltimore radio broadcast.¹⁰⁸

It might be assumed that the macho world of veteran organizing — with its fraternity-esque hi-jinks and hyper-masculine patriotic rhetoric — would have little place for female anticommunist activists. In fact, the Legion Auxiliary — a group open to the female family members of Legionnaires as well as women ex-

¹⁰⁸ *Variety*, 2 April 1952, p.2, quoted in Thomas Doherty, “Hollywood Agit-Prop: The Anti-Communist Cycle, 1948-1954”, in *Journal of Film and Video*, Vol. 40, No. 4, Fall 1988, p.17; *Firing Line*, 1 June 1952.

soldiers — did participate, but its take on one hundred per cent Americanism was generally less antagonistic than that of its male counterpart. Occasional direct Cold War engagement aside — such as a 1951 attempt to persuade the annual Women’s Patriotic Conference on National Defense to endorse a US pull-out from the UN, or a 1954 plot to fund a chain of wooden churches to be built along the western side of the Iron Curtain — Auxiliary patriotic actions tended towards social goals, such as banning comic books or promoting civic engagement among young women.

As K. A. Cuordileone illustrates, this gendered discourse reflected a wider trend in red scare politics. Concerns at the evolving sexual morality of the USA coalesced around “an inflated, brittle, hyper-allegiance to the traditional heterosexual family” in the face of apparent communist attempts to subvert it. Unlike the female-centric anticommunist organizations discussed in chapter four, veterans’ auxiliaries, subordinate to their male counterparts, were able to promote the socially conservative ideal without the inherent contradiction of women in transgressively militant leadership positions. From the convention of referring to Auxiliary members by their husband’s names, to the self-evident logic that men should take to the streets to protest while women should campaign from the home via telephone trees, the major veterans’ organizations worked towards the preservation of traditional gender and family roles, implicitly furthering the defence of the homeland as they did so.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ *Report of National Defense Committee 1944-45*, Glendale Post 127, American Legion, Box 12, Radical Right; K. A. Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p.71.

By the mid-summer, *Firing Line* boasted of a “record breaking” six week picket of romantic comedy *The Marrying Kind*, starring Judy Holiday, while upcoming campaigns against *High Noon* and golf-themed Katherine Hepburn vehicle *Pat and Mike* were also promoted. In December, the presence of star José Ferrer and director John Huston in the credits for *Moulin Rouge* saw Legionnaires again hitting the sidewalks outside downtown cinemas, including at the film’s Los Angeles premiere, with placards reading “The American Legion Bans José Ferrer” and “Communist Press Praises John Huston”. The following month, the Legion reported that the pair were now “displaying the type of cooperation we have requested in the past”, suggesting they had finally been convinced (by their employers or their own consciences) of the wisdom of prostrating themselves, in letter form, before the Legion’s arbiters of Americanism.¹¹⁰



Image 12: Legionnaires confront director John Huston and his entourage during a picket of *Moulin Rouge*, *Los Angeles Times*, 23 December 1952.

¹¹⁰ *New York Times*, 26 Dec 1952, p.20.

Along with enthusiastic documenting of the expanding Legion picketing movement, and updates of new film projects featuring still-suspect performers, the anticommunist newsletters also provided veterans with a vision of an alternative Hollywood, one more in line with the Legion's hard-line Americanist stance. *Firing Line* urged readers to buy tickets for the Leo McCarey-directed 1952 picture *My Son John* — featuring Dean Jagger as the conservative Legionnaire father of a wayward communist son — warning darkly of “rumors floating around of some very high level and clever skullduggery to ‘kill the picture before it reaches the hicks’.” In keeping with the film's homophobic undertones (the titular John is played as an effeminate, overly-mothered counterpoint to his patriotically masculine father), the Legion publication mocked *New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther's unsympathetic review of the film in unmistakably insinuating terms: “His sensitive soul detects great artistic flaws ... [we] suspect we caught Bosley with his ‘great drama’ around his ankles”.¹¹¹

As Cuordileone points out, implications of homosexuality, whether overt or bound up in more vague assertions of softness or eggheadedness, were deeply intertwined in anticommunist suspicions and rhetoric. Insecurity over “sex perverts” operating within the red conspiracy — and other unmanly elements enabling the conspiracy through ignorance or other weakness — spoke to wider concerns over the direction of an unstable post-war culture; Legionnaires, like other right-wing activists, both “exploited fears of an unrestrained sexuality in

¹¹¹*Firing Line*, 1 June 1952.

American life and at the same time helped to create them". Shortly after World War Two, the Glendale Legion post in Southern California undertook an extensive survey of juvenile delinquency in the city, claiming that character deficiencies in the nation's youth — particularly anti-masculine tendencies such as "softness" and "self-indulgence" — "undoubtedly invited the attack by Japan and encouraged Hitler in his dreams of world-conquest". For the Glendale Legion, only a return to heterosexual, manly values could steel adolescents for the upcoming battle against the Soviet menace — step one of which was to fight back against the "doctrine of self-expression [...] imported from Russia by a group of long-haired sob-sisters [and] labeled as [...] 'Progressive Education'".¹¹²

Perhaps the greatest success story of the Legion's picketing campaign was Charlie Chaplin's *Limelight*. After the National Executive passed a resolution urging distributors to withdraw the film until the actor and director's status as "a questionable alien" had been resolved, New York's Bronx and Huntington posts picketed local screenings. So too did the ever-reliable D.C. department at the only two small theatres in the city that were showing the movie. Detroit Legionnaires voted to protest in their city, while Hollywood's Legion post vowed to demonstrate outside of any screening of *Limelight*, anywhere in the greater Los Angeles area. Luckily for the Hollywood veterans, their bold promise was not severely tested, as the picture quickly disappeared from the few cinemas that

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 1 June 1952; Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War*, p.xi; *Report of National Defense Committee 1944-45*, Glendale Post 127, American Legion, Box 12, Radical Right.

had ignored the protests, and did not receive a full US release until some two decades later.¹¹³

The Legion was vigorously criticized for its “clearance” and picketing tactics, notably by the Dean of the National Cathedral in Washington, Reverend Francis Sayre, and by liberal magazines such as *The Nation*, which called the veteran leaders’ collusion with studio bosses “Exhibit A in the evidence of this era’s corruption of the American tradition”. *Firing Line* countered that Legionnaires were simply practicing self-protection by keeping their “hard-earned money out of the pockets” of those who sought to destroy America, noting that “even an idiot would probably have some doubt as to giving money to a self-admitted professional assassin who openly admits he needs the money to buy a gun with which to kill him and his family”.¹¹⁴

Lurid language aside, there was disingenuousness in the Legion’s claim to be only interested in the financial implications of leftists in the cultural realm, rather than sitting in artistic or moral judgement over the content they produced. In 1948, the Rincon Annex post office in San Francisco unveiled a series of twenty-seven murals depicting California’s history. They had been created by Anton Refregier, a Russian immigrant “identifie[d] [...] with dozens of subversive, Communist front, and Communist organizations,” and cost \$26,000 of public funds. California Legionnaires duly campaigned to have the work destroyed, despite the fact that neither Refregier, nor by extension any

¹¹³ *Firing Line*, 1 March 1953.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*; *The Nation*, 8 April 2009.

subversive group he supported, stood to benefit economically from its continued display.¹¹⁵

In 1953 the Legion joined with the VFW, AMVETS, the Republican Women's Council, the Sons of the American Revolution, and the Associated Farmers of California to present the case against the murals in House Joint Resolution 211 — an initiative backed by newly inaugurated vice president Richard Nixon. The veterans detailed objections that ranged from the pedantic — in a panel depicting Allied guns trained on Nazi Germany, the weapon bearing the flag of the United Kingdom is above that adorned with the Stars and Stripes — to the bizarre claim that behind a figure representing the United States was “an extremely unnecessary shading which would indicate that this person had mulelike ears”. Tellingly, though, the bulk of the criticism centered not on evidence of specific communistic propaganda — hardly likely, even from a project of that icon of American left-liberalism, Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration — but on the inclusion of labour struggles and the mistreatment of Chinese immigrants in the history of the state. Under the banner of counter-subversion, Legion activists attempted to deny class and race consciousness in the public sphere — not because it represented any national security threat, but because it offended their conservative, anti-New Deal political values.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ *Firing Line*, 15 February 1955; “Rincon Annex murals, San Francisco, Hearing before the Subcommittee on Public Buildings and Grounds of the Committee on Public Works”, House of Representatives, 83rd Congress, 1st session, 1 May 1953, House joint resolution 211, Folder 9-1168, Box 7, *Counterattack* Files.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*



Image 13: Rincon mural No. 27, "Signing the UN Charter", available at <http://www.collectorsweekly.com/articles/the-murals-of-rincon-center-in-san-francisco/>; Note "mulelike" shading behind US delegate's head; Rincon mural No. 14, "Torchlight Procession", available at http://foundsf.org/index.php?title=Eight_hour_day_movement.

Incidents of grassroots Legion anticommunism occurred with increasing frequency as the wider red scare took hold in the early 1950s, and areas with a particular concentration of conservative activists became relative hotbeds of veteran counter-subversion as well. Two years after the riots in Peekskill, Westchester veterans took aim at renowned women's college Sarah Lawrence. Stereotyped as both excessively genteel and educationally progressive, the small, private institution had been presided over by Dr Harold Taylor since 1945 and he had instilled a proudly liberal value system in his staff and students. The world of Ivy League and elite academia in America was a prime target for the anticommunist establishment and Sarah Lawrence's location amid the active

grassroots anticommunist communities of Westchester meant the college faced attack on all fronts.¹¹⁷

Patriotic forces first coalesced around Sarah Lawrence in late 1951, motivated — as in the schools-based campaigns discussed in chapter five — by concerns over communist professors imparting subversive ideas to young minds, and a more general, conservative opposition to modern, “progressive” educational theories embodied by Taylor and his college. In the span of a few months, articles critical of the Westchester institution appeared in the mainstream press (thanks to the always reliable Hearst columnists) and via the specialist, anticommunist publishing network (including *Counterattack* and the pamphlets of educational campaigner Allen Zoll). *American Legion Magazine* joined the fray with a November 1951 article by Louis Budenz. The piece used the typical anticommunist rhetorical technique of conflating critiques of supposed red subversion and of liberal defences against accusations of un-Americanism, here under the banner of “academic freedom”. Thus, alongside names of professors at various universities whose work had been praised by the Communist Party or who had been cited as belonging to front groups (including Sarah Lawrence sociologist Dr Robert Lynd), appeared an indictment of Harold Taylor for voicing the fear that the McCarthyite climate was stifling the academic expression of students — or his own “God-given right to infect our children with [a] made-in-Moscow virus,” as Budenz framed it.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ *New York Times*, 16 October 1951, p.25. See Ellen Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) for a detailed account of red baiting in higher education.

¹¹⁸ *New York Times*, 23 January 1952; “Do the Colleges *Have* to Hire Red Professors?”, Lasky ed., *The American Legion Magazine Reader*, p.171.

At the same time as Budenz's article reached subscribers, the Americanism Committee of the Westchester Legion sent representatives to visit Dr Taylor. They furnished the college president with the information that three of his seventy-one teaching professionals had backgrounds that gave the veterans cause for concern, and warned of the "fullest publicity" if he did not take action. Taylor's response was a statement that stridently defended the political and intellectual freedom of his staff. He added that the fear of indoctrination was moot as any educator who attempted to unduly prejudice his students would be unmasked on professional rather than political grounds.¹¹⁹

The Sarah Lawrence case was enthusiastically taken up by the local media and prominent figures on both sides of the debate. A 175-strong committee of eminent citizens formed to defend the college, while Reverend Harold Hohly of Bronxville's Christ Protestant Episcopal Church wrote directly to Legion commander Daniel Woodhull decrying his "extra-legal" approach to counter-subversive investigation. Thirty-three Protestant churches then joined the fray under the auspices of the Yonkers Council of Churches, criticizing the Westchester Legion's attempted interrogation of Taylor as "similar to the method of 'McCarthyism'". The acting mayor of Bronxville, in contrast, applauded the veterans and warned the Sarah Lawrence supporters against "fuzzy thinking" on the issue of un-American activities. The Legionnaires pressed on with their campaign, claiming, somewhat brazenly, that it was *they* who were victims of a "smear campaign". Moreover, by condemning the methodology of those who

¹¹⁹ *New York Times*, 23 January 1952.

sought to expose un-Americanism at Sarah Lawrence, the supporters of the college were in fact implicated in the crimes being perpetrated there, for they had adopted the “tactics of a pickpocket who, when pursuers crowd in on him, cries ‘Stop thief!’ to distract attention”.¹²⁰

While the Westchester Legion voted through resolutions calling on HUAC to investigate Sarah Lawrence, and demanding the college forfeit its tax-exempt status, Dr Taylor stepped up his pushback against the “bull[ying]”, “meddl[ing]” Legion investigators with the unveiling of a report into the affair. As with many liberal targets of grassroots counter-subversion, Taylor saw his troubles not as a concrete, local issue, but more a philosophical, existential question of progressive modernity versus repressive, conservative values. “The American Legion has demanded, simply, that [Sarah Lawrence faculty members] stop thinking, stop writing, stop acting and stop teaching,” he complained.¹²¹

The Westchester Americanism committee kept up the pressure on Sarah Lawrence throughout the 1950s, with periodic calls for boycotts and congressional censures, but the initial momentum was lost thanks to the president’s intransigence (as well as his ranks of influential backers) and the school continued to educate its few hundred wealthy young women without disposing of any suspect faculty. The local Legion nevertheless remained actively counter-subversive, launching its own version of upstate Syracuse’s community anticommunist newsletter *Spotlight* and continuing to campaign particularly on

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 7 February 1952, p.29; *Ibid.*, 22 February 1952, p. 10; *Ibid.* 14 February 1952.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 9 May 1952; *Firing Line*, 15 May 1952.

educational issues. In 1954 they tried, and failed, to remove Columbia teaching professor — and “fellow traveler” — Dr Goodwin Watson from his part-time role consulting at New Rochelle’s youth mental health support facility, the Guidance Center. A year later they embarked on their most audacious counter-subversive action yet: against a League of Women Voters-sponsored citizen’s educational programme on the Bill of Rights called the Freedom Agenda.¹²²

The authors whose work was distributed by the Freedom Agenda argued against red scare politics in high-minded terms, appealing to patriotic and religious precedents for free speech and tolerance. Undeterred by such an ostensibly reasonable enemy, the Westchester Legion assembled a diligently documented case for its un-American nature. Investigators were dispatched to a national Freedom Agenda gathering, where they compiled a detailed ten-page dossier on major speeches and smaller conferences at the event. Beyond the content of the pamphlets themselves, the veterans pointed to the financial backers of the scheme: the Ford Foundation’s pro-democracy, anti-McCarthyist organization the Fund for the Republic. The Fund, they complained, had supported red-baited Pennsylvanian librarian Mary Knowles, distributed a TV interview with nuclear scientist-turned “security risk” Robert Oppenheimer, promoted a documentary made by news anchor and McCarthy opponent Edward Murrow, and produced a television series featuring liberal cartoonist Herblock.¹²³

¹²² *New York Times*, 7 January 1954; “Goodwin Watson and his Record”, Westchester American Legion pamphlet, Box 19, Radical Right.

¹²³ “Documentation on Freedom Agenda Program: Based on Facts and Information Available as of May 31, 1955”, Folder 21, Box 39, *Counterattack* Files; “Report by the Un-American Activities Committee”, American Legion Westchester County Convention, Mt. Kisco, N.Y., 16 July 1955, *Ibid.*

The Westchester report on the Freedom Agenda was adopted first by the New York Legion, then by the national organization. In Syracuse, New York, Legionnaires followed the lead of their downstate comrades by actively resisting the programme's spread at the grassroots. Undercover investigators attended discussion groups in private homes across the city, producing detailed commentaries on the actions and character of the attendees. These ranged from the contention that a "Doctor or Professor Karp" was "very vocal, aggressive and oily when necessary", to the observation that a student named John Rogers was "evidently 'somebody'" within the Freedom Agenda organization, "since he is given much consideration, despite his crepe rubber shoes". More than simply providing ammunition for its public assaults on the project, such subterfuge was clearly exciting for Legionnaire investigators, enhancing the sense they were conducting a military-style campaign against subversion and reinforcing their self-conception as a home front in the Cold War. As one veteran-detective merrily noted of a meeting chairwoman, "[she was] very suspicious about everyone and everything, except you know who". The inevitable letter-writing campaign also ensued. John Dungey, the anti-subversive committee chair of the Onondaga County, Syracuse post, contacted Ford Motor Company president Henry Ford II directly, appealing to the car industry heir's vanity: "It was the name of Ford that started our country to greatness in the automobile age and in this case it must be Ford who will help us out of the propagandizing by the Left-Wingers and One-Worlders." Ford responded to Dungey explaining that, as the Fund for the Republic was operationally independent from the foundation that established it, he had no remit to interfere. He did offer some encouragement for the Legionnaires, however, noting that he believed some of the Fund's actions

“have been dubious in character and inevitably have led to charges of poor judgment”.¹²⁴

For all that the Westchester Legion’s assiduously, and deviously, researched report into the Freedom Agenda captured the imagination of Americanist veterans, efforts to tarnish determinedly moderate projects as subversive, or even controversial, seemed out-of-step with mainstream sensibilities by late 1955. The League of Women Voters, showing more fortitude than many of the grassroots anticommunist network’s targets, flatly rejected the national Legion’s demand that it disown the suspect literature, announcing it would “not yield to intimidation, oppression or false charges”. On one level, the Legion’s understanding of the Freedom Agenda’s educational remit as an inherently political proposition was the correct one: it was clearly created as an intellectual, liberal rebuff to the legacy of McCarthyism, whatever non-partisan, academic-historical qualities its proponents claimed for it. At the same time, by seeking to vanquish its literature from American libraries and living rooms, the veteran counter-subversives ended up perfectly illustrating the programme’s point. There was logic to the Legion’s broadening of its focus from communist un-Americanism to the un-Americanism of moderates who rejected the sort of patriotic absolutes the veterans dealt in, but it left them increasingly isolated in a post-McCarthy political scene. By taking on the venerable League of Women Voters, alongside other, equally esoteric campaigns like the attack on UNESCO,

¹²⁴ “Freedom Agenda Meetings at [the home of] Dean Ralph Kharas”, 202 Berkeley Drive, Syracuse, N.Y. (notes taken by Onondaga County Legion investigators), *Ibid.*; Brooklyn *Tablet*, 8 October 1955; Letter from E.M. Somers, Chairman, Americanism Committee, Northport Post 694, American Legion, Northport, New York, *Ibid.*; Letter from John E. Dungey, Chairman Anti-Subversive Committee, Post 41 and Onondaga County American Legion to Henry Ford II, 1 November 1955, *Ibid.*; Letter from Henry Ford II to John Dungey, 2 December 1955, *Ibid.*

the Legion seemed to align itself with the ultra-conservative fringes of the anticommunist movement, undermining its respectable status and assumed authority on national security matters.¹²⁵

The Veterans of Foreign Wars followed a trajectory generally comparable to the American Legion's increasingly anti-progressive and confrontational public patriotism during the red scare era. Though the VFW traced its roots back to the Spanish-American War of 1898, its prominence in the early Cold War owed much to a remarkable resurgence following the end of World War Two. While the Legion solidified its position as the preeminent veterans group, and new bodies like AMVETS and the AVC came into being, the VFW more than quadrupled its membership as the troops returned home, from a low-point of 250,000 before the war to more than a million in the late forties. Like the Legion, the VFW concerned itself with the quest for a "one hundred per cent Americanism", alongside the more routine practicalities of veteran advocacy, and, like the Legion, found that, when faced with the new Cold War reality, this Americanism increasingly took the form of hard-line anticommunism. In the first half of the twentieth century, the VFW campaigned for the "Americanization" of new immigrants, the adoption of correct flag etiquette and the censorship of insufficiently pro-American school textbooks, but its relative lack of financial clout limited its patriotic endeavours. After the war, however, the group's improving fortunes coincided with a more militant approach.¹²⁶

¹²⁵ *New York Times*, 18 July 1955; *New York Times*, 11 March 1957.

¹²⁶ Minott, *Peerless Patriots*, pp.72-89.

As with the Legion, top-level Americanist policy decisions were unveiled at annual national conventions — or “encampments” in VFW parlance. In September 1946, for example, the organization called on Congress to “abolish and prohibit” the Communist Party. Also like their Legion counterparts, albeit on a much smaller scale, the VFW employed a permanent, paid Americanism staff — comprising three directors and three stenographers. One of the achievements of this division prior to the Cold War was the establishment of an annual “Americanism Day” in late April, partly in opposition to the traditional left-wing celebration of May Day. This relatively low-key ritual, which began in 1920, contained the seed for arguably the most visible and successful mass-participation anticommunist action of the red scare age: the Loyalty Day Parade. It was visible because over a number of years beginning in 1948 the VFW managed to mobilize tens of thousands in a grand ceremonial statement of anticommunist ideals; successful because, in seeking to confront May Day marchers en-masse, but peacefully, the parade participants managed to “grasp control of public space”, as Richard Fried puts it, ultimately casting into the shade one of the few remaining opportunities for the radical left to stand proud in Cold War America.¹²⁷

¹²⁷ *New York Times*, 6 September 1946, p.6; Fried, *The Russians Are Coming!*, pp.52-66.



Image 14: *Brooklyn Tablet*, 29 April 1950, p.10.

According to popular fable, New York VFW members conceived of Loyalty Day in its Cold War shape after Kings County commander Joseph Aimee and future Brooklyn Loyalty Day chairman James Mackin witnessed veterans marching in the workers' celebrations of 1947 and lamented that even former soldiers could become the "victims of insidious subversive propaganda". Plans for a large-scale counter-parade gathered pace over the coming year with New York mayor William O'Dwyer agreeing to act as honorary chairman for the event and city employees granted paid leave to march. This provided a crucial extra level of mainstream respectability to proceedings, as did the presence of Attorney General Tom Clark on the parade's reviewing stand.¹²⁸

¹²⁸ *Ibid.* Democrat Mackin lobbied hard for Clark's participation, apparently in order to thwart GOP factions within the veterans groups who were pushing for Republican Harold Stassen to provide national level political endorsement.

“Separated by a few city blocks and an immeasurable gulf of political belief” — as the *New York Times*’ front page story elegantly put it — two marches, both numbering in the tens of thousands, set off on 1 May 1948. The May Day demonstrators took their traditional route down Eighth Avenue, from around Fifty-Fifth Street to Seventeenth, then across to Union Square; the Loyalty Day participants began at Ninetieth Street and Fifth Avenue and proceeded south down the famous central thoroughfare to Sixty-Second Street. Between the two parades stood five thousand police officers: on alert “should marchers from one group decide to cross town and interfere with the other,” as the *Times* explained. May Day attracted its usual mix of communists, socialists and unionists; the VFW members were joined by fellow veterans from the American Legion, Catholic and Jewish War Veterans, ethnic groups (particularly from communist “captive nations”), and right-wing union men. Unsurprisingly, the respective sizes of the two events were hotly disputed, with police, organizers, right-wing and left-wing press offering wildly differing estimates. Taking into account the various biases, and the span of figures quoted, it would be reasonable to surmise that the two parades were of a relatively similar size.¹²⁹

By 1950, Loyalty Day was a nationwide spectacle, with over four hundred towns and cities taking part, according to the VFW, including major metropolises like Chicago. The New York parade maintained the by now standard pageantry, with Boy Scouts waving hundreds of American flags, members of the Russian Anti-

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*; *New York Times*, 1 May 1948, p.1; Police claimed twenty thousand leftists took part compared to between thirty and forty thousand patriots. The *Daily Worker* estimated eighty-five thousand May Day marchers and only eight thousand Loyalty Day paraders. Assuming a large bias from the latter, and a smaller bias from the former, a rough tie in the twenty-five thousand range seems a reasonable conclusion.

Communist Center dressed as Cossacks on horseback, Catholic school bands in colourful uniforms, and parade “Queen” Ethel Merman in an open-top automobile, but grim weather withered the crowds along the march route, to the point where they were only one or two deep. Moreover, perhaps minded by the violence in Peekskill seven months earlier, the veterans scheduled their parade for 29 April rather than May Day, establishing a standard routine that would see the leftists continue to hold their celebrations on 1 May while Loyalty Day would take place on the most convenient day either side of that date. It entailed a victory of sorts for the workers’ day supporters, as their spectacle would no longer be sullied or overshadowed by direct confrontation with their conservative enemies, but their May Day hegemony had already been destroyed and as the 1950s progressed the annual leftist celebration in New York faded into obscurity.¹³⁰

What was the meaning of Loyalty Day’s successful reshaping of the New York May Day landscape? Its 1948 and 1949 editions were rare moments in Cold War culture where — as at Peekskill — a group of the most committed grassroots domestic Cold Warriors faced off physically with genuine communists and would-be revolutionaries. Unlike Peekskill, the mutual shows of strength passed off peacefully, despite the concerns of the police. The reasons for this lack of a violent showdown are manifold, but the VFW organizers’ determination to present a non-partisan, establishment-endorsed spectacle seems to have been a key decision. Whatever the reality of an essentially political performance on both

¹³⁰ Fried, *The Russians Are Coming!*, pp.52-66; *New York Times*, 30 April 1950, p.1; The 1949 Loyalty parade had been booked for 30 April, but the May Day organizers switched their date to coincide with their anticommunist opponents.

sides, the Loyalty Day boosters took pains to create a narrative whereby the traditional May Day commemoration of the working classes was “no longer a Labor parade but a celebration of communism” — as Loyalty Day general chairman James McGrory put it — while its patriotic rival offered a benign espousal of universal American values. Co-opting city employees and school children to the cause suggested official-level approval, while the support of anticommunist unions alongside veterans group tempered any sense of anti-labour authoritarianism. Cross-party political backing also boosted the march’s mainstream appeal and helped separate the event, at least superficially, from the aggressively right-wing anticommunism elsewhere (indeed, the founding fathers of Loyalty Day — Aimee and Mackin — were both active Democrats).¹³¹

The VFW’s victory in presenting its patriotic pageantry as normative and ideologically unburdened can be seen in the transition in mainstream media coverage. The *New York Times*’ story on the 1948 event was headlined “Left and Right Groups in City Will March to Stress Ideals”; subsequent reporting avoided such politicized distinctions. Other factors contributed to Loyalty Day’s ascendancy over May Day — its prime location on Fifth Avenue rather than out on the West Side, the enveloping McCarthyite mood that was driving communists and their allies off the streets and underground anyway — but its significance lay not just in raining on the leftists’ parade. Most noteworthy was the contribution of the grassroots activists of the VFW (neither “the Establishment” or “the *hoi polloi*”, as Fried describes these mid-level veteran leaders) to the promotion of “loyalty”— demonstrative, flag-waving patriotic consensus — as a mainstream

¹³¹ Fried, *The Russians Are Coming!*, pp.52-66.

corrective to un-American class solidarity. Ironically, the crushing of May Day's spirit contributed to Loyalty Day's own downfall: poor weather continued to diminish attendance in the early fifties (a promised million spectators in 1952 materialized as less than 20,000), and as the decade progressed the lack of a clearly-defined enemy meant public interest never recovered. As the national politics of McCarthyism became more polarized and divisive, so too did the grassroots activism, with Loyalty Day's scope contracting to a core of veteran and Catholic hard-liners.¹³²

The major veterans' groups contributed greatly to the domestic anticommunist scene of the early Cold War: from grandstanding national rhetoric that echoed and sometimes outdid the red-baiting political establishment, to countless community anticommunist actions both noteworthy and obscure. The upper echelons of the American Legion in particular enmeshed themselves firmly within the counter-subversive establishment — through political lobbying and strong, symbiotic links to both the FBI and the entertainment industry — and provided a genuine, if somewhat problematic, link from the McCarthyist elites to the grassroots. Local posts, meanwhile, interpreted the counter-subversive dictates of their leaders in Indianapolis in myriad ways. Veterans also, it must be said, ignored the Americanist pronouncements of their representatives far more often than they responded to them. Even the infamous Norwalk VFW post boasted only a small number of active anticommunist crusaders — as Minott points out, just seventy-seven of three hundred and fifty members attended the

¹³² *Ibid.*; *New York Times*, 1 May 1948, p.1; *Ibid.*, 30 April 1950, p.1; *Ibid.*, 27 April 1952, p.1.

meeting where the red hunt was ratified, and not all of those backed the project.¹³³

Those veterans who did sign up for the Cold War home front crusade reacted in varying ways to the zealous speechifying and conflicting messages emanating from national HQs. Official directives spoke to public respectability and deference to the anticommunist authorities of Congress and the FBI, but the urgency of the apparent threat combined with the passivity of the proposed response was always going to lead enthusiastic activists into murky waters. The veterans' leadership itself knowingly blurred the lines between its self-granted national security mandate and the potential for local-level vigilantism: denying responsibility for film picketing, for instance, while coyly celebrating it in *Firing Line*. In general, the spirit at the grassroots mirrored that at the leadership level. As the Cold War deepened, the national anticommunist mood soured and polarized, and the veterans' party line became more conspiracist and wide-ranging in its denunciation of left-wing — always left-wing — un-Americanism. So too did the actions of the rank-and-file, resulting in the hounding not only of film stars and university professors with radical pasts, but members of august organizations like the League of Women Voters.

Did this ever-more reactionary conception of Americanism make the veterans groups, in effect, a right-wing political movement? While their uncompromising anticommunism meant they shared a platform with various elements of the conservative and hard right, outside of the issue of counter-subversion the

¹³³ Minott, *Peerless Patriots*, p.94.

veterans groups were ostensibly apolitical. In reality, the ideological stance of the American Legion, especially, was more problematic and complex than that. On one hand, the affiliations of prominent members reflected its mainstream, establishment aspirations, with politicians from across the political spectrum proudly claiming Legion membership. Remarkably, a February 1949 *American Legion Magazine* article extolling the virtues of unquestioning patriotism even praised veteran radical politician Norman Thomas as a “staunch American who also happens to be a Socialist”. At the same time, from its early days as a National Association of Manufacturers-backed strikebreaking body, activities on the Legion front line often tilted rightward. Liberal and left critics frequently identified and decried the taint of fascism in the Legion’s hard-line definition of Americanism, a reductive critique certainly, but one that was not entirely without validity.¹³⁴

Despite this, the major veterans’ organizations retained at least an appearance of bipartisan, establishment-endorsed authority during the early Cold War. Their members’ war service gave legitimacy to claims on the patriotic consensus, and the increasingly conservative, anticommunist direction of their leadership helped define this consensus along ever more authoritarian and illiberal lines. Actions taken at the grassroots by individual posts, meanwhile, varied in vision and practice: from the populist and successful (Loyalty Day), through the controversial but still effective (the Hollywood pickets), to the flawed and marginalizing (the Sarah Lawrence and Norwalk investigations). The cases presented in this chapter offer a patchwork of representative examples,

¹³⁴ Eugene Lyons, “Speak Up for America!”, Lasky ed., *The American Legion Magazine Reader*, p.4.

including the most celebrated (and criticized) actions; there are surely dozens more, many unknown outside the Legion or VFW halls that spawned them. Fueled by status-bestowed righteousness and top-level Americanist directives, the Legion and the VFW — while too diverse and multifaceted to be considered mass-membership anticommunist entities themselves — represented perhaps the most effective and consistent vehicle by which the rhetoric of the Cold War home front was translated into grassroots political action.

Chapter Three

A Counterconspiracy of Righteousness:

Cold War Christianity and its Grassroots Conservative Legacy

Gene Birkeland first spoke to God on the corner of Sepulveda and Victory Boulevards. It was the spring of 1953 and she was sat at a red light in her Ford two-door sedan, not far from her home in the rapidly expanding Los Angeles neighbourhood of Van Nuys. She had called herself a Christian before this moment but it was here, amid the sprawling suburban boomtown under the vast Southland sky, that the young mother suddenly understood the true meaning and usefulness of her faith. Already a veteran of the grassroots anticommunist movement as a member of the Minute Women of the USA, Birkeland now saw the connection between the earthly fight against Cold War subversion and the spiritual battle for America's soul. She resolved to resist the "drive world-wide to wipe out God" just as surely as she had fought the influence of United Nations-inspired "one-worldism" in public schools for the previous two years.¹³⁵

God acknowledged her newfound devotion some months later. As Birkeland sat at her typewriter — the same old pre-war Royal model upon which she had laboured in her role as secretary for the Emergency Citizens Committee during the Los Angeles school board's UNESCO controversy — tapping out another diatribe against world government conspiracy, she felt overwhelmed by the great evil she was compelled to describe. Falling to her knees to pray for

¹³⁵ McClay, *In The Presence of Our Enemies*, p.xxxvi. Gene Birkeland used various pseudonyms during her career as an anticommunist agitator, including Leigh Burkeland and Ellen McClay.

deliverance from her burden, she heard a voice reassuring her that she had been chosen, handpicked to warn America of the UN's plan to infect schoolchildren with left-wing theory, and to have its own critics carted away in the name of mental hygiene. She reasoned with her heavenly interlocutor: "I'm just a housewife in Van Nuys, California [...] How can I do this thing?" The voice repeated that she was chosen, and that she was strong.¹³⁶

Like Gene Birkeland, the grassroots anticommunist community increasingly embraced the Christian faith as the struggle on the Cold War home front progressed. With godlessness the defining characteristic of Soviet-style ideology for many Americans, it made sense that religious folk would look church-wards for answers to the communist question. The counter-subversive establishment encouraged such spiritual reflection, making clear that Christian values were under threat from domestic radicals just as surely as capitalistic ones. "Could I belong to a Church? [...] Could I be married in the Church? [...] Would I be allowed time off for religious holidays?" wondered HUAC's hypothetical American of life under a Soviet regime in its "100 Things You Should Know About Communism" pamphlet. "Not a chance," came the reply.¹³⁷

The churches responded to the citizenry's search for Cold War spiritual guidance. For a number of religious leaders, the gospel of anticommunism became a primary method of communication with their flock — whether

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.xxxvii.

¹³⁷ "100 Things You Should Know About Communism" entered into *Congressional Record*, 82nd Congress, 1st Session, House Document No. 136, 14 May 1951, by the Committee on Un-American activities, Box 32, Collection of Underground, Alternative and Extremist Literature, 1900-1990, UCLA Library, Department of Special Collections, Manuscripts Division, Los Angeles, CA.

through genuine perception of the devil's hand in Marxist politics, or a more expedient sense of the prevailing ideological winds — and new figures emerged on the national clerical stage via the force of their counter-subversive Christian polemic. In Denver a Baptist minister named Kenneth Goff offered perhaps the most blunt performance of righteous anticommunism, earning himself a night in jail after ripping down and cutting up a Soviet flag that was hanging outside the Denver Civic Center as part of its United Nations Day commemorations. Goff, a seasoned right-wing campaigner and self-styled “evangelical in the field”, opposed atheistic communism not just on theological grounds but as a practical, imminent threat to his hometown's security. “Two large riots will break out in Denver,” he predicted, revealing his knowledge of a secret communist plan to assume control of the Mile High City. “These riots will be led by zoot-suiters and will require sending large forces of police. While the police are busy trying to quell the riots, handpicked bands of Reds will seize the radio and television stations.”¹³⁸

Only slightly more prosaically, an energetic young preacher from North Carolina named Billy Graham had begun sermonizing on the dangers of communistic godlessness from a circus-style marquee in downtown Los Angeles two years earlier. While identifying Satanic intent in far left politics was only a small element of the fledgling firebrand's theological arsenal, it caught the attention of publisher and arch red-baiter William Randolph Hearst, who promptly compelled his tabloid empire to raise the profile of Graham to a national level,

¹³⁸ *Denver Post*, 25 October 1951, Box 4, Radical Right; *Rocky Mountain News Forum*, undated clipping, *Ibid*.

setting him on the path to becoming “the foremost global evangelist of the twentieth century”. Other men of the cloth found fame in extolling anticommunism and conservatism via the pulpit and pamphlet, particularly those based in the budding Republican heartlands of suburban Southern California. A pastor and religious entrepreneur named James Fifield combined Christianity, counter-subversion and free-market economics, connecting his thriving congregation with the wider right-wing network via an ambitious programme of grassroots organization, political education and community-wide institution-building. Upstart crusaders like Fred Schwarz and Billy James Hargis embarked on politico-religious campaigns that were fundamentalist both in their interpretation of the Bible and the red-baiting creed.¹³⁹

Anticommunism also provided a forum for intra-church tensions. Despite its apparent incongruity with Karl Marx’s vision of a world “without religion, morals or ideals as we know them”, “100 Things You Should Know About Communism” answered “Unfortunately yes” to the question “Are there communist Clergymen?” Presbyterian activist Carl McIntire and his Methodist counterpart Myers Lowman built careers around such concerns — with the latter claiming between eight and nine hundred religious leaders in America were “full-fledged Communists” in 1954 — bringing McCarthyism to the church, and helping shift the balance of national Protestant power from moderate ecumenicalism towards conservative fundamentalism in the process. While some within this new wave of Christian counter-subversion merely adapted previous notions of a Papist

¹³⁹ Paul Harvey and Philip Goff ed., *The Columbia Documentary History of Religion in America Since 1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 3.

enemy within to a leftist one, there also was shared purpose — if not explicit cooperation — between the Catholic and Protestant traditions over the communist question. Mass Catholic prayer operations were conducted, inspired particularly by the plight of their co-religionists under European Soviet rule, while influential institutions such as the Brooklyn *Tablet* newspaper and Cardinal Francis Spellman's New York Archdiocese ensured that, for East Coast Catholics especially, hard-line anticommunism was an integral part of early Cold War observance.¹⁴⁰

Unsurprisingly, given the parallel, intertwined ascendancies of political conservatism and highly politicized religious conservatism in the 1980s, there has been considerable scholarly investigation of the Christian right over the past two decades. Just as the perceived electoral clout of outspoken religious leaders like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson forced political commentators to take seriously a vast, and previously overlooked, constituency of fundamentalist and evangelical Christians, so too have historians worked to redress past neglect, and produce a body of literature that explores the roots and precedents for this modern American phenomenon. These scholars found explanations that predated the most superficially satisfying observations — that congregations had become politically motivated in direct response to a raft of socially progressive legislation and legal decisions in the late 1960s and 1970s, most notably the landmark *Roe v Wade* abortion ruling of 1973. Instead, they argued

¹⁴⁰ "100 Things You Should Know About Communism" in Box 32, Underground Literature; *Freedom Club Bulletin*, 15 April 1954, Box 9, Radical Right (all further *Freedom Club Bulletin* citations from Box 9, Radical Right, unless otherwise stated).

that this newly high-profile Christian activism, as Kim Phillips-Fein notes, “grew out of a long-standing engagement with political life”.¹⁴¹

Texts such as George M. Marsden’s *Fundamentalism and American Culture* and Grant Wacker’s *Heaven Below* illustrate the extent of this continuity. More useful to this thesis is the literature that finds origins of the late twentieth-century Christian right amid the same post-war cultural and social upheavals that facilitated popular support for the red scare. In particular, Darren Dochuk emphasizes the great migration of white, Christian Southerners to the emerging metropolises of the Southwest and West, and with it the subsequent broadening of social conservatism’s heartland — from an isolated, stagnating Deep South to a wide, prosperous sunbelt. More than simply bringing with them a conservative, evangelical tradition, he argues these transplants to wealthy enclaves like Orange County were actively pioneering a new type of prosperous, politically engaged, and aggressively right-wing community. Daniel K. Williams points specifically to the function of suburban geography in elevating evangelical megachurches as the symbolic heart of sunbelt life, while Bethany Moreton looks at the role of institutions like Pepperdine University and Harding College in spawning not just religious leaders but an educated, pious and politically engaged middle class to follow, and organize behind, them.¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ Kim Phillips-Fein, “Conservatism: A State of the Field”, in *Journal of American History*, Vol. 98, No. 3, December 2011, p.733.

¹⁴² George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism 1870-1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980); Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2011); Daniel K. Williams, *God’s Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (Cambridge:

While many of these longer histories of the Christian Right acknowledge the early anticommunism of future movement figureheads like Billy Graham, there is less specific consideration of the utility of red scare rhetoric in building mass followings, or of the contribution of church leaders in publicly supporting McCarthyist counter-subversion. This is partly an issue of emphasis: while many big name preachers honed their craft and began to find their flock during the height of the red scare, it was only in the 1960s — when one-note anticommunism had fallen out of fashion as the primary method of right-wing rabble rousing — that the evangelical conservative activist truly arrived as a transformative national figure. As for the historiography of McCarthyism, fundamentalist and evangelical Christians feature even less prominently. The influence of Catholic faith on McCarthy and some of his supporters is the subject of Donald F. Crosby's *God, Church and Flag*, but the role of Protestant leaders in the red scare, as well as the motivations of the general congregations of both churches, is largely absent from early Cold War political histories. This seems a notable omission in such an extensively researched period. While anticommunist religious groups may have been of marginal national influence in terms of the legislative and legal scars left by McCarthyism, the schisms red-baiting wrought between mainstream, moderate Protestantism and its insurgent evangelical cousin, as well as the career advancement it provided to future conservative Christian icons, suggest a dynamic and overlooked legacy. From Billy Graham's formative experiences as a Cold War crusader to William F. Buckley's

Harvard University Press, 2009); Stephen P. Miller, *Billy Graham and the Rise of the Republican South* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

Catholicism-inspired interpretation of intellectual anticommunism, the connections between Christianity, conservatism and early Cold War counter-subversion demand greater consideration. This chapter addresses one significant element of that under-analysed field: church-based anticommunist action involving ordinary Christian Americans, and its meaning for the future growth of an activist religious right.¹⁴³

America became more pious in the early Cold War, both as a people and as a symbolic entity. Religious participation increased to reach an all-time high by the end of the 1950s, with sixty-five per cent of people belonging to a church or synagogue and ninety-six per cent claiming denominational affiliation of one kind or another. Investment in church construction went up by four thousand per cent in the fifteen years following the end of the Second World War. This outbreak of faithfulness was encouraged and fostered at all levels of society, from Eisenhower — “‘high priest’ of civil religion”, according to Paul Harvey and Philip Goff — on down. With the president directly instructing the citizenry to attend church, and the phrases “under God” and “In God We Trust” added to the Pledge of Allegiance and dollar bill respectively, Americans were not simply becoming more religious, but the very fact of being an American was acquiring a more religious component. This blurring of national and spiritual ideals was not a new phenomenon — conceptions of a unique Christian destiny inherent in the

¹⁴³ Donald F. Crosby, *God, Church and Flag: Senator Joseph R. McCarthy and the Catholic Church, 1950-1957* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978). Stephen Whitfield’s *The Culture of the Cold War* also provides a chapter-long overview of Catholic and Protestant trends.

American project predate the founding of the modern state — but patriotic piety was given new momentum by the Cold War.¹⁴⁴

Not all of the increased religiosity can be directly attributed to concerns over communism at home and the geopolitical standoff abroad, but Harvey and Goff particularly argue that “the rapid rise of evangelicalism and Pentecostalism is clearly connected to American fears surrounding the Cold War”. Evangelical leaders combined a gospel of economic individualism, social conservatism and counter-subversive zero tolerance with dynamic organizational tactics that embraced radio and television, furthering their grasp of the national zeitgeist. Mainline Protestantism, with its traditionalist structure, communal outlook and, most damningly, socially progressive wing, suffered both by contrast and as a consequence. While the moderate United Methodist Church remained, by a small margin, the preeminent Protestant denomination in America by the end of 1950s, the wheels were in motion, and over the next forty years it had continued its decline in relative stature to the point where it was only half as large as the new national leader, the conservative Southern Baptist church. Other mainline Protestant groupings suffered similar erosions of influence.¹⁴⁵

Los Angeles occupies an essential space in the story of evangelical, politically conservative Christianity’s Cold War ascent. As Lisa McGirr observes, for many of the hundreds of thousands of migrants who settled there in the post-war years, pursuing their own version of manifest destiny amid the palm trees and

¹⁴⁴ Harvey and Goff ed., *The Columbia Documentary History of Religion in America Since 1945*, p.5.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.3.

comfortable new tract homes, the Southland really was “God’s country”. Federal funding for military production, in particular, fed a spectacular boom in the region’s economy. The fifties saw a 246 per cent increase in weapons industry spending as the Cold War arms race took hold, with California disproportionately the beneficiary of the government’s munificence. In all, the state profited from around \$50 billion of Department of Defense expenditure during the decade, with Los Angeles the recipient of sixty-one per cent of the bounty. In turn, the city swelled by approximately two-thirds between 1940 and 1960, progressing from a regional powerhouse to a global one. The transformation was magnified in Los Angeles’ suburbs, with Orange County, for example, growing by nearly four hundred per cent during the same period. Among the masses who flooded to this prosperous, sun-baked sprawl were many, like Gene Birkeland, who subscribed to a conservative version of Christianity. “As they left home,” Dochuk points out, “Oklahomans, Arkansans, Texans, Missourians, and Louisianans carried their churches with them, then replanted them on California terrain”.¹⁴⁶

In the autumn of 1949, Billy Graham informed an audience of several thousand evangelical Christians and the soon-to-be-converted that “The world is divided into two camps! On the one side we see Communism [which] has declared war against God, against Christ, against the Bible, and against all religion!” Graham was, by some margin, the most enduringly significant of the Protestant early Cold War crusaders. From a tent on the corner of Washington and Hill streets in downtown Los Angeles, he delivered rapid-fire, intensely theatrical sermons to ever-expanding crowds. The Southland was only the beginning for Graham, and

¹⁴⁶ McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, p.21; Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt*, p.xvi.

anticommunist ardour just one element of the preacher's electrifying appeal. Nevertheless, the counter-subversive gospel unquestionably contributed to his immensely successful exportation of Southern religious traditions — a “rise to prominence [...] unintelligible outside the milieu of dread and anxiety in which he emerged”, according to Stephen Whitfield.¹⁴⁷

Still, for all that his spiritual conception of global events contributed to a politicization of American religion that would gather pace considerably in subsequent decades, Graham's anticommunism hewed more closely to the consensus Americanism of the political mainstream, and he was generally more interested in saving souls than seeking out subversives. A handful of fundamentalist preachers, by contrast, made red-baiting the primary focus of their mission, finding followings and fortune, particularly in the Southland's suburbs, via hard-line speechifying, radio broadcasting and pamphleteering. These included figures like Carl McIntire, an Oklahoma-raised, New Jersey-based Presbyterian who became, according to Dochuk, America's “foremost Christian anticommunist” during the early Cold War. While McIntire travelled the country preaching the conservative gospel, his counter-subversion largely took the form of attacks on fellow church leaders rather than concrete community engagement. In 1941, he launched the American Council of Christian Churches [ACCC] as a bitter fundamentalist rival to the ecumenical, socially reformist Federal Council of Churches [FCC; later the National Council of Churches, or NCC]; by the mid-

¹⁴⁷ Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War*, p.77.

fifties anticommunism had become his most potent weapon in an on-going power struggle.¹⁴⁸

While the ACCC's charges of Soviet church infiltration were outlandish, there was a brutal logic to assailing mainline Protestantism, which remained both the dominant religious force and a firm opponent of conservative anticommunism during the early Cold War. In 1953, for instance, the General Council of the NCC-affiliated Presbyterian Church in the USA advised its several million members of the immorality of McCarthyism, stated that the United Nations was "in harmony with the principles of God's moral government", and declared "Let us always be ready to meet around a conference table with the rulers of Communist countries" — principles that were anathema to holy Cold Warriors like McIntire. FCC/NCC heads G. Bromley Oxnam ("Prophet of Marx", according to McIntire) and Eugene Carson Blake ("Chief church spokesman for leftist causes") were proud progressive liberals who believed in the cause of economic and racial justice both as a moral, Christian imperative and as the best means for fighting the communist threat; McIntire, by contrast was a racist and anti-Semite, and the ACCC defended church segregation as "not unchristian". The ACCC could not hope to match its mainline rival in terms of mass support, but by red-baiting the NCC leadership so aggressively it raised both its own profile and weakened the liberal Church hegemony.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt*, pp.151-152.

¹⁴⁹ "Bishop Oxnam: Prophet of Marx", Folder 9-1057, Box 6, *Counterattack* Files; Carl McIntire, "Eugene Carson Blake: The Chief Church Spokesman for Leftist Causes", Folder 9-292, Box 5, *Counterattack* Files; "Letter to the Presbyterians from the General Assembly" (1953), quoted in Harvey and Goff, *The Columbia Documentary History of Religion in America since 1945*, pp.29-35; *Ibid.*, p.7; "Compromising Churches and Disobedient Preachers", Right-Wing Pamphlets, Box 10,

McIntire's mid-fifties notoriety was matched at the turn of the new decade by two younger fundamentalist rabble-rousers: Billy James Hargis and Fred Schwarz. Hargis, an Arkansas-born, Oklahoma-based "bawl-and-jump" preacher, had actually formed one of the earliest religious anticommunist organizations — the Christian Crusade — in 1947, but it was not until he reached Southern California some years later that the young firebrand found the sort of prosperous, activist conservative community to support such an endeavour. By the early 1960s his Crusade was pulling in over \$1 million a year — a tax-exempt sum secured through a combination of book and taped sermon sales, \$100-a-person anticommunist leadership courses, and, strangely enough, Hargis-endorsed vitamin tablets. His was now, the *Saturday Evening Post* reported, "the best-heeled of all the far-right organizations" in America.¹⁵⁰

If Hargis was Christian counter-subversion's loudest voice in the post-McCarthy era, then Schwarz brought intellectual heft to the continuing campaign. After coming to America from under the patronage of Carl McIntire, the Australian lay preacher set about establishing himself as an authority on the red conspiracy in the Southland, setting up his own Christian Anti-Communism Crusade in Long Beach and producing numerous texts that purported to offer a scientific diagnosis of the maladies of left-wing thought. Schwarz claimed experience as a professor of mathematics and science, a general medical practitioner and a psychiatrist. This impressively broad résumé informed a suitably serious

Folder 172; *New York Times*, 22 March 2002; Clive Webb, *Rabble Rousers: The American Far Right in the Civil Rights Era* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), p.86.

¹⁵⁰ *Saturday Evening Post*, undated clipping, Folder 9-904, Box 6, *Counterattack* Files.

mantra: “Understanding is the Irreducible Minimum for Intelligent Counter-action”. Again, it took until the early 1960s for Schwarz to achieve national renown, by which time he had passed the \$1 million-per-year fundraising milestone, preached at numerous large-scale rallies including at the Hollywood Bowl, and secured high-profile business backers. The successes of McIntire, Hargis and Schwarz might give the impression that Christian anticommunism in California did not emerge as a significant phenomenon until well after the McCarthy-era red scare, and even then centred on demagogic, profit-driven individuals rather than widespread grassroots mobilization. A significant exception to this rule was a pastor who achieved far less long-term infamy, but whose efforts enriched the Southland’s evolving conservative community greatly during the early Cold War.¹⁵¹

The Reverend James W. Fifield took up his post at the vast, debt-ridden First Congregational Church in central Los Angeles in 1935. The church had been an established part of the city’s Protestant scene since 1867, but, three years before Fifield’s arrival, had made the seemingly disastrous decision to relocate to a grand, Cathedral-style edifice on the block between Sixth, Hoover and South Commonwealth in the Westlake neighbourhood of the city, just west of Downtown. The then pastor, Dr Carl Patton, envisaged a neo-Gothic masterpiece to rival the recently completed Riverside Church in New York and Rockefeller Chapel in Chicago. Yet by the time work was finished on the new structure —

¹⁵¹ Dr Fred Schwarz, *Communism: Diagnosis, Treatment* (Los Angeles: World Vision, Inc., 1955), p.1; Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt*, p.152; James Fifield’s Cold War Southern California popularity is noted in many studies of the early post-war Christian right, but there has been no sustained scholarly examination of his church’s remarkable rise — possibly due to its incongruity with the wider trends towards evangelism and fundamentalism.

with its more than 150 thousand feet of floor space and a 157 feet tall tower modelled on the Great Tower at Magdalen College, Oxford — America was deep in depression and many among the church's one thousand members were unable to fulfil pledges to the construction fund. *Time* magazine later reported that, prior to his departure, the outgoing pastor was observed wandering the grand halls of First Congregational, switching off electric lights in a desperate attempt to save money. In a gesture of both biblical resonance and bold capitalistic consumption, Fifield made sure every bulb in the church burned bright once he arrived in Los Angeles, recruited from his home in Grand Rapids, Michigan.¹⁵²

Two decades later, First Congregational was one of the largest and most successful churches in the Southland. Though Fifield's preaching style was far removed from the evangelical fire and brimstone of someone like Billy Graham, his pulpit had also become the region's most significant source of religiously minded anticommunism and conservatism. In the words of Eugene Carson Blake, "The loudest ecclesiastical voice heard from this area has long been known as a spokesman for the most reactionary of political and economic interests in the nation".¹⁵³

A combination of Los Angeles' booming population and Fifield's vigorous recruitment enabled the five-fold expansion of First Congregational's membership. The city's new freeway system, opened in the early 1950s,

¹⁵² Royal G. Davis and Marion Luenberger, *Light on a Gothic Tower* (original publication details unknown), available at <http://www.thetintypeshop.com/church/Library/Davis/chapters21to25/chapter21/chap21.htm>; *Time*, 3 August 1942, p.21.

¹⁵³ *New York Times*, 23 May 1955, p.21.

solidified the demographic advantages, connecting the church's downtown home with the flourishing middle-class suburbs. This affluence was reflected both in the functions of the church — of the five regular sessions offered on a Sunday, one was an early morning “Golfer’s Service” — and the donations solicited by its pastor. Even a special children’s collection box was regularly filled with over \$100 worth of pennies at the week’s end. By the occasion of First Congregational’s seventy-fifth anniversary in 1942, Fifield had secured enough funding to pay off the church’s \$750,000 mortgage. “General Motors lost a good salesman when Fifield went into the ministry,” said one commentator of the pastor’s appeal. It was an apt comparison, as the pastor’s faith in the word of Christ was more than equalled by his devotion to the ideology of the free market.¹⁵⁴

Fifield called his brand of spiritual capitalism “Freedom Under God”. At a general level it was a creed of individualism — in keeping with Jesus’ teaching, as characterized in a 1949 article, that communities, families, and nations “exist only to serve the individual [...] not to require that the individual serve the group”. In terms of the political implications of this philosophy, Fifield drew patriotic comparisons with the earliest days of American society. In a 1952 sermon he claimed both a personal lineage to the Founding Fathers — telling parishioners he was a direct descendant of Samuel Adams — and an ideological ancestry that stretched back as far as the Plymouth Colony. Approvingly, he recounted a story of colonists threatening Governor William Bradford with tarring and feathering unless he renounced “communism” — characterized as

¹⁵⁴ Davis and Luenberger, *Light on a Gothic Tower*; *Time*, 3 August 1942, p.21.

the equal distribution of food from the communal store — and explained that modern citizens had lost this individualistic spirit. “People in America do not have confidence in the future of the free enterprise system,” he observed. “How can they have confidence in it when government and our citizens seek to destroy it?”¹⁵⁵

Beyond simply preaching the gospel of the free market, Fifield set up a framework of institutions to promote “Freedom Under God” throughout First Congregational’s parish and beyond. Shortly before leaving the Midwest for Los Angeles, he had helped launch an anti-New Deal religious group called Spiritual Mobilization [SM] in Chicago, and he continued to administer, and profit from, this organization in California. SM sought to enlist religious leaders along with business and educational elites in a two-fold campaign to promote capitalist ideals within the church, and faith initiatives within the corporate community. According to Eckard Toy, the group was “a religious equivalent of the American Liberty League in its program and its membership”, and its supporters included influential figures such as Sunoco Oil president J. Howard Pew. The oilman was a conservative Presbyterian, opposed to perceived social liberalism within the Protestant church, and proved a dedicated recruiter among his fellow business leaders. SM, he informed the recipient of one funding solicitation letter, was “worth to business and industry many, many times what it has cost”. By the early years of the Cold War, SM claimed around sixteen thousand ministers “of all denominations” had signed up for the crusade, its appeal facilitated by Fifield’s mastery of the available media resources. *Faith and Freedom, The Freedom Story*,

¹⁵⁵ Davis and Luenberger, *Light on a Gothic Tower*.

and “Pause for Reflection” — a magazine, radio programme and newspaper column respectively — disseminated the economic libertarian message of “Freedom Under God” to a wide audience.¹⁵⁶

At the same time, Fifield sought to directly educate and politically inspire his congregation in Los Angeles via speeches and lectures. In 1938 he instituted the Sunday Evening Club, a “non-sectarian weekly service of inspiration and fellowship, devoted to the promotion of moral and religious ideals”. Religious theorists and academics dominated schedules in the early years, with no especial right-wing bias. In 1939 the visit of former US ambassador to Germany William Dodd was combined with a large-scale anti-Nazi rally at the six-thousand-capacity Shrine Auditorium, a few miles south of First Congregational. Nevertheless, a gradual shift to a more explicitly hard-line conservative agenda was evident over the Club’s twelve-year lifetime. The first ever Sunday Evening Club speaker was African-American theologian and civil rights campaigner Dr Howard Thurman; the final sermon was delivered by arch-anticommunist and China lobbyist Alfred Kohlberg. In 1950 the lecture series was replaced by a new Tuesday night meeting — a similar, but more much more politically focused body called the Freedom Club.¹⁵⁷

While not a political movement per se, the Freedom Club quickly became a focal point for the Southern California conservative community, as well as an essential

¹⁵⁶ Eckard Toy, “Spiritual Mobilization: The Failure of an Ultraconservative Ideal in the 1950’s”, *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, Vol. 61, No. 2, April 1970, pp. 77-86; Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan* (New York: Norton, 2009), p.73.

¹⁵⁷ Davis and Luenberger, *Light on a Gothic Tower*.

source of right-wing and anticommunist oratory. Soon there were over thirty branches across the region, as well as a handful in the Midwest. Weekly attendance in Los Angeles alone averaged thirteen hundred. Every Sunday night, pastor Fifield would address a further two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand Southlanders as host of *Straight From the Shoulder*, a half-hour television discussion show based on the Club's ideals. Many of the grassroots anticommunist network's most popular rabble-rousers spoke at the Freedom Clubs while members were active in various counter-subversive actions. In 1952, conservative writer George Sokolsky placed the group at the forefront of what he called "one of the most stirring phenomena" of the age: "the rise of what might termed the grass roots organizations throughout this country". That same year, Club-goers contributed to Los Angeles schools' "UNESCO crisis", attending Board of Education meetings to shout down supporters of a UN-backed teaching programme and sending letters to newspaper editors denouncing its "world government" aims. Reverend Fifield himself stoked the campaign via his radio and television broadcasts. According to pro-UNESCO activist Dorothy Franks, the Freedom Club was the source of a false, but widely repeated, claim that the US Congress had refused to fund the "subversive" UN organization. In 1954, meanwhile, Freedom Clubbers helped swell the ranks of Rabbi Benjamin Schulz's march on Washington to protest Senator McCarthy's censure, albeit to a not especially inspiring six-hundred-and-fifty. Also that year, members of the Club's Chicago branch worked with Minute Women founder Suzanne Silvercruys Stevenson and others in an ill-fated attempt to set up a right-wing third party — the Constitution Party.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁸ *Collier's*, 28 March, 1953; *St. Petersburg Times*, 17 November 1954; *The Day*, 9 August 1952.

According to the Freedom Club credo, to be a member was to believe that “the State should be the servant, not the master, of its individual citizens”, and in the “right of the people to alter” any form of government, if it becomes “destructive of individual liberty”. Alongside these idealistically libertarian goals, members subscribed to a more specifically conservative tenet: “The economic principle of free enterprise and the ownership of private property.” A typical night’s programme at the main First Congregational Club would begin with a meal at 6.30pm followed, at 7.15pm, by an invocation, a recital of the Pledge of Allegiance, and a rendition of the “Star Spangled Banner”. After a performance of another hymn by the church’s musical quartet, the main speaker of the evening would address the guests at length, before Reverend Fifield provided some concluding remarks. Following this, the offering plate would be passed and the pastor and guest lecturer would visit the overflow rooms to ensure that everyone had a chance to catch a glimpse of the evening’s star attraction and contribute financially to the cause, before a brief question and answer session and a final benediction concluded proceedings.¹⁵⁹

Freedom Club members and attendees represented a cross-section of the sort of educated, middle-class conservatives, often recently arrived from the South or Midwest, who would form the right’s Southern California base in subsequent decades. Bob Elliott moved to Los Angeles from Chadron, Nebraska in the 1930s to study at the University of Southern California, his attendance encouraged by his father, an ambitious, learned man who for many years was the president of

¹⁵⁹ *Portsmouth Times*, 31 May 1952, p.6; *Freedom Club Bulletin*, 11 February 1954.

Chadron State College. His mother, too, was unusually educated for the age and taught Latin to school students, undergraduates and fellow instructors. While living in downtown LA, Elliott began attending First Congregational, and quickly grew attached to the church and its charismatic pastor — for over thirty years he served as an usher and was eventually one of the pallbearers at his friend Fifield's funeral. A dedicated Freedom Club member, Elliott was a "staunch right-wing conservative", in the words of his daughter, and expressed his creed both through anticommunism and traditional moral values. He remained an avid consumer of right-wing literature in the post-red scare era and was at one point involved with the John Birch Society.¹⁶⁰

Marie King came to Los Angeles from Louisiana, already entrenched in both a southern evangelical religious tradition and a populist Democratic political faith. Reluctant union involvement during a strike at the movie studio where she worked tilted her opinions rightward before her experiences at Billy Graham's revival meetings helped prepare her for the Freedom Club's more unambiguously conservative message of "Freedom Under God". King took a job as the executive secretary for SM and worked for Fifield's organization until her marriage to Walter Koenig in 1956. She regularly attended Freedom Club meetings and the combination of her professional and activist tutelage at First Congregational prepared her for her new life as a full-time housewife-activist. King volunteered at two prominent Southland anticommunist groups of the late fifties — the American Public Relations Forum and the Network of Patriotic

¹⁶⁰ Webster's Fine Stationer's Web Blog, available at <http://webstersfs.blogspot.co.uk/2010/06/reading-through-what-my-friends-have.html>.

Letter Writers — and by the early sixties, having long ago switched party affiliations, was campaigning tirelessly for Barry Goldwater's doomed run at the White House.¹⁶¹

Marie Larson was another relatively educated, middle-class young migrant to California who embraced First Congregational Church and Freedom Club activities. She moved to Los Angeles from Chicago with her husband after the war, attended classes at UCLA and found work as a legal secretary, while raising two daughters. As well as helping organize Freedom Club meetings for more than twenty years, Larson took charge of the church's Women's Club and its second-hand shop. Her conservative campaigning continued in later life, too. After moving back to the Midwest, she became a regular correspondent with local newspapers, composing letters and guest editorials arguing against the size of government, America's United Nations membership, and its international trade agreements. One of these newspapers described her in an obituary as a "life-long champion of Constitutional Principles".¹⁶²

Larson's introduction to Freedom Club-style conservatism may well have come via her boss in Los Angeles, Gerald Sheppard. A former dentist turned dental malpractice defence attorney, the USC graduate served a one-year term as chairman of the Los Angeles Club during its early fifties and wrote many articles in its weekly newsletter, the *Freedom Club Bulletin*. In later years he remained committed to Christian activism, helping found First Congregational's Pilgrim

¹⁶¹ Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt*, pp. 135-136; Michelle Nickerson, "Politically Desperate Housewives: Women and Conservatism in Postwar Los Angeles".

¹⁶² *Porterville Recorder*, 8 March 2008; *Ibid.*, 20 September 2004.

School — a religious elementary school — and at one time serving on the board of Pepperdine University. The Pilgrim School, opened in 1958, was just one of a dizzying array of clubs, activities and side-businesses associated with the church, with widespread participation and leadership in these projects encouraged as a means of drawing ordinary worshippers closer into the fold. In 1938 Fifield explained to fellow church leaders he had more than 1,600 parishioners in positions of responsibility within the wider First Congregational family. By the mid-fifties, the portfolio included the thrift store and Women's Club mentioned above, a businesswomen's association, a "Mary-Martha Guild" dedicated to the upkeep of church facilities, a World Friendship Club encouraging global intra-denominational cooperation, a nursery and many more besides. A 270-acre campsite and conference centre had been built in the San Bernardino Mountains while, back downtown, Fifield himself set up three "Fifield Manors" — retirement homes that became popular with older church members. The majority of these enterprises had no overt connection to anticommunism or the grassroots right, but Kim Phillips-Fein maintains that "[a]ll of the church's activities were tinged with Fifield's conservative politics". Either way, the scale and organizational dynamism of Fifield's religious empire — fuelled by both wealthy backers and willing parishioners — gives an illustration of the mobilization that enabled the Freedom Club's success.¹⁶³

As well as committed Club members like Bob Elliott, Marie King and Marie Larson, the Freedom Club's sphere of influence extended to activists from other

¹⁶³ *Glendale News-Press*, 16 May 2002; Davis and Luenberger, *Light on a Gothic Tower*; *Los Angeles Times*, 17 May 2002; Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands*, p.73.

groups who attended occasional meetings and participated in the exchange of conservative ideas. High-ranking Minute Woman Gene Birkeland, for example, gained an education in the UNESCO conspiracy through the Freedom Club writings and speeches of a fellow Southern California housewife, Lillian Moore Roberts. Texas-born Roberts had moved to the Southland with her family in the thirties, after her father died and her sister began university in Los Angeles. She briefly worked as an actress, married twice, and lived in Arizona, New York, Florida and Uruguay. During the war she trained as a pilot in an experimental programme called the Women Airforce Service Pilots, eventually becoming one of around one thousand female civilians who worked ferrying military aircraft around the country and relieving male airmen for combat duty. Returning to California after the war and still only in her early thirties, she married for a third time, to Hollywood actor Roy Roberts, and found a new calling as a conservative polemicist. In 1952, Roberts revealed to Freedom Club members the sinister implications of UNESCO: “unseen, deadly, and everywhere”. More than simply offering a conspiracist denunciation of a hated institution, Roberts spelled out the absolutist logic of hard-line anticommunism. Put simply, the goals of communist spies and those of the “progressives and extreme liberals” who occupied “the majority of positions of power in our Federal Government, in our system of education [...] and in the United Nations” were “exactly the same”. All attempts to deny communist intent, all protestations of innocence or ignorance, were thus irrelevant. Roberts also made a case for a grassroots, faith-based commitment, not just to resisting liberal educational ideas, but also to replacing them with conservative, religious ones: “Lift your voice! Apply your intelligence! Defeat the planned regimentations of your children! And work ceaselessly to

secure for them a life founded on the incomparable American principle of 'Freedom Under God'".¹⁶⁴

This is a small sampling of Freedom Club volunteers and activists that nevertheless shows some clear consistencies. They were young, white, middle-class Christians. While their politics were conservative, they were not always especially traditional in their personal lives. They were relatively well educated, well travelled and ambitious. For them, meetings at First Congregational and the other Southland Clubs were not so much a temporary reaction to Cold War fears as the first engagement in a long struggle against American liberalism. At least in this representative sample, grassroots religious anticommunism certainly seems to have been a breeding ground for the Christian right of California's future. By contrast, a highly critical newspaper report in 1952 described a typical Freedom Club disciple as "a man or woman (especially a woman) of about fifty-five or sixty years old who has retired and moved here from Iowa". Rather than a prosperous community organizer like Marie King and Bob Elliott, "He lives on a small fixed income and, having nothing to do with his time and energy, he exists in a ferment of protest." Furthermore, unlike the dynamic and dedicated campaigners surveyed here — Birkeland, for instance, railed against the United Nations "conspiracy" for her entire life, and self-published a near seven hundred page treatise on the subject while in her eighties — these attendees were apparently more reactive than proactive in their Cold War mobilization. As the

¹⁶⁴ Hometown by Handlebar, available at <http://hometownbyhandlebar.com/?p=2379>; Lillian Connors Roberts-Risdon Oral History Interview, October 7-8, 1996, Woman's Collection, Texas Woman's University, Denton, Texas; Lillian Moore Roberts, "UNESCO: The Greatest Danger to America's Youth", online facsimile available at <http://truthaboutib.com/unescogreatestdanger.html>.

journalist put it, “[The typical Freedom Club member] is easily organized, easily frightened and he has a lot of time on his hands to listen to the radio and make denunciatory phone calls.” It is not clear how such a geographically and financially specific conclusion was reached, but it is true that many Club-goers were older than those surveyed here. In reality, as a popular institution in the heart of expanding, transitional community, the Freedom Club welcomed worshippers and enthusiasts of all ages, means and sophistication-levels. It clearly suited liberal hopes and prejudices to portray these religious conservatives as reactionary retirees, destined for swift political obsolescence. Despite such wishful thinking, the younger, wealthier, more accomplished activists were ultimately far more indicative of the Southland’s on-going ideological development.¹⁶⁵

As important as grassroots appeal to Fifield’s early fifties success was his extensive roster of high profile backers. While the Freedom Clubs project was more populist in ambition than Spiritual Mobilization — which earned Fifield the tag “Apostle to Millionaires” from one supporter — the membership of the organization’s advisory board paid testament to the enduring appeal of “Freedom Under God” to conservative-minded elites. At various times, Freedom Clubs, Inc., was able to claim association with former Harvard Law School Dean Dr Roscoe Pound, Dean Clarence Manion of Notre Dame Law School and the Caltech physicist Dr Robert Milikan. It also counted on the support of retired navy Admirals Leslie Gehres and M. K. Fleming; Eastern Air Lines president

¹⁶⁵ *Hartford Courant*, 7 November 1952, p.26; “Constitutional Threats in the Alaska Mental Health Act”, Box 45, Radical Right.

Eddie Rickenbacker and clothing magnate J. C. Penney; the writers George Sokolsky and Fulton Lewis Jr.; and, from the entertainment industry, Bing Crosby and Cecille B. DeMille. Conservative business leaders like Conrad Hilton of Hilton hotels, Olivia Ann Beech of Beechcraft aeroplanes, and Walter Knott of the Knott's Berry Farm theme park, all paid tribute to Fifield and his ideas, at one time or another. Within the political establishment, right-wing educator/politician Max Rafferty and conservative California justice Marshall McCombs were similarly supportive, while Ronald Reagan called Fifield's devotion to "Freedom Under God" an "inspiration".¹⁶⁶

These illustrious names provided top down legitimacy and mainstream respectability to the Freedom Club. More than a grassroots organization seeking to build a religious-conservative movement from the ground up, First Congregational Church was a space where establishment figures could interact with and attempt to influence the general public. Future heroes of the American right made "career-affirming" appearances. William F. Buckley delivered a well-received address on "the Liberal Mind" in early 1955, while, in the late fifties, Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater laid out his ideas for a union-busting "right-to-work" law. Despite his own state having already passed such legislation some years before, Goldwater was a leading voice in the anti-collective bargaining crusade, "credited by even those who disagree with him with believing

¹⁶⁶ Toy, "Spiritual Mobilization", pp. 77-86; *Washington Post*, 18 May 1952, p.M7; "The Christian's Political Responsibility", Box 4, Radical Right; Davis and Luenberger, *Light from a Gothic Tower*.

passionately in the menace he describes with such fervor”, according to one newspaper report.¹⁶⁷

California’s own bid for a legally-enshrined “open shop” centred on conservative Republican ex-senator William Knowland, who made the issue the central plank of his 1958 gubernatorial campaign. The Freedom Club was strongly associated with Knowland — not only was he a popular speaker at First Congregational, but both Fifield and then-SM head James Ingebretsen offered enthusiastic backing for his candidacy. Despite this support, and that of right-wing pro-industry groups like NAM and the Chamber of Commerce, the GOP candidate lost badly to Democrat Pat Brown. It was a crushing blow for Knowland. He had pressured the popular moderate Republican incumbent Goodwin Knight to trade the nomination for a (similarly disastrous) run at his own previously safe Senate seat, but his naked political manoeuvring and unpopular anti-labour line drove away voters. It also tarnished the reputation of Fifield’s religious-conservative network, too, though it proved to be only a temporary setback for the wider Californian right — Knowland had been seen as a rising star, and potential presidential candidate for 1960, but his downfall simply smoothed the path of his great in-state conservative rival Richard Nixon to the GOP nomination.¹⁶⁸

Such open advocacy for a specific politician was not out of character for the Freedom Club. While moderate right-wingers and apparently non-political speakers were welcomed, there was a clear bias towards conservative

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*; Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt*, p.117; *Freedom Club Bulletin*, 29 March 1955; *Miami News*, 30 October 1958, p.8A.

¹⁶⁸ Toy, “Spiritual Mobilization”, pp. 77-86; *Washington Post*, 18 May 1952, p.M7; “The Christian’s Political Responsibility”, Box 4, Radical Right.

Republicans throughout the 1950s, despite the usual claims of Americanist non-partisanship. A 1952 issue of the *Bulletin* focussing on the California primary elections was particularly instructive as to the group's party political position. The elections of 3 June, readers were informed, represented "a most momentous decision for God, for Freedom and for America!" As such, the *Bulletin* offered its desired outcome, not as the preference of Fifield or the church leaders, but as the "very evident majority viewpoint" of Club members, as gleaned from many months of debate and discussion. Neither of the group's favoured presidential candidates — Senator Robert Taft and General Douglas MacArthur — were on the Republican ballot, so readers were asked to check the box for an "uninstructed" ticket headed by conservative Bakersfield, California Congressman Thomas Werdel rather than moderate state Governor Earl Warren. Further advice was given on a ballot measure, with readers invited to vote "no" on Proposition B to oppose the construction of public housing in Los Angeles.¹⁶⁹

The fight against this measure formed part of long, local-level resistance to the urban renewal aims of the 1949 Housing Act — after initially approving a federal contract to build ten thousand new homes, various councilmen, under pressure from homeowners' associations and their right-wing colleagues, reversed their position and cancelled the scheme. Proposition B represented an attempt to reinstate the construction project and was bitterly opposed by organizations like the Chamber of Commerce and the Small Property Owners League, in a campaign fought using red scare tactics and occasionally race-baiting language. For its part, the *Freedom Club Bulletin* described the measure as a "[s]ocially stupid

¹⁶⁹ *Freedom Club Bulletin*, 29 May 1952.

usurpation of local rights” and a “Socialistic monstrosity being ‘forced down the throat’ of Los Angeles by the power mad autocracy of the ‘welfare state’ tyranny of the National Administration.” In the end, Earl Warren comfortably won the Republican primary, but the anti-public housing campaigners scored an equally resounding victory on Proposition B. The struggle continued in the coming months and was taken up by an active member of First Congregational, GOP Congressman Norris Poulson. Backed by the local business community, he challenged pro-public housing incumbent Fletcher Bowron in the 1953 mayoral election and won by thirty-five thousand votes on a record turnout. According to Donald Parson, “[t]he Red Scare in public housing [was] seemingly the major issue that led to Poulson’s slim victory”.¹⁷⁰

The Freedom Club’s electoral engagement went beyond simply providing a forum for politician speakers and instructing members how to vote. *Bulletin* issues immediately following the 1952 California primary provided mailing addresses for all convention delegates, Republican and Democrat, asking readers to send them their views on the important issues. As the newsletter explained it, nominating their chosen presidential candidate was only the “first obligation” of the delegates to the conventions — beyond that they were entitled to vote on the party platform according to their own conscience, and thus were ripe to be swayed by the views of the conservative grassroots. At an even more community-oriented level, an early 1955 meeting demonstrated how the Club worked to mobilize followers in the continuing anti-UNESCO school board fight.

¹⁷⁰ Donald Craig Parson, *Making a Better World: Public Housing, The Red Scare, And the Direction of Modern Los Angeles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), p.130.

Members were not only implored to vote in the school board election — it would be “un-American” to abstain, explained Gerald Sheppard — but also to bring friends and neighbours to an “extremely important” pre-election discussion at First Congregational. Unsurprisingly, all three “expert” speakers at this event, including Lillian Moore Roberts, were strongly against any resumption of “UNESCO teaching” in Los Angeles schools.¹⁷¹

Though arguably less demonstrative in its conservative anticommunism than the veterans’ organizations or the raft of new patriotic pressure groups during the early Cold War, the significance of the Freedom Club’s early Cold War engagement is shown by the sheer breadth of speakers eager to engage with its grassroots activist audience. Its weekly schedule read like a *Who’s Who* of the counter-subversive right, from establishment authorities to bona fide community Cold Warriors. As an illustration, during the early months of 1954 alone churchgoers had the opportunity to hear lectures from former FBI agent Emmett McGaughey and anti-UNESCO school board members Ruth Cole and Edith Stafford. They witnessed speeches by conservative, red-baiting Republican politicians like senators Joseph McCarthy and John Bricker and California representative Donald Jackson. China lobbyists like author Geraldine Fitch and retired army general Albert Wedemeyer also spoke.¹⁷²

Domestic Cold War conspiracy was a particular focus. In September 1953 Roy Brewer, former Hollywood head of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage

¹⁷¹ *Freedom Club Bulletin*, 12 June 1952; *Ibid*, 22 March 1955.

¹⁷² Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt*, p.117; *Freedom Club Bulletin*, 17 December 1953.

Employees and later president of red-baiting movie industry body the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, spoke on “What I learned About Communists From My Hollywood Experiences”. In April 1954 Circuit Riders boss Myers Lowman made eye-catching claims about the number of secret party members among the American clergy. McCarthy was a Club favourite. In 1952 a ten-page Freedom Club pamphlet celebrating the senator’s red hunting achievements was widely distributed among members of Congress after Alfred Kohlberg paid for a mailing campaign. Two years later, McCarthy repaid the favour, scheduling a speech at First Congregational as the only non-Republican Party event on his nine-date, GOP-backed “Twenty Years of Treason” tour. Highlighting the significance of the occasion, admittance was by ticket only with passes distributed at the preceding week’s meeting, no doubt ensuring a larger-than-usual audience for a talk by two Lithuanian refugees.¹⁷³

Club attendees and subscribers to the *Freedom Club Bulletin* also received an extensive education in American foreign policy, almost exclusively filtered through a conservative, quasi-isolationist worldview. The UN was a regular target for scorn and opposition, as was treaty making and international cooperation. The proposed Bricker Amendment to the constitution — a non-interventionist proposal that would have curtailed the government’s ability to make formal agreements with foreign nations — was repeatedly promoted in Freedom Club talks and publications. The Allied Powers’ San Francisco Peace Treaty with Japan, meanwhile, was colourfully described by the *Bulletin* as a

¹⁷³ *Freedom Club Bulletin*, 24 September 1953, 11 February 1954, 15 April 1954; *Washington Post*; 18 May 1952, p. M7; *New York Times*, 4 February 1954, p. 11.

“prospective global ‘whited sepulchre’ that will [...] be ‘filled with dead men’s bones’ and the broken, ravished corpse of American Freedom.”¹⁷⁴

Then there were the more general right-wing targets: the national debt, social security, and a proposed \$19.5 million bond issue to fund a new music-arts-and-entertainment complex in Los Angeles all received condemnation in the halls of First Congregational and pages of the Freedom Club newsletter during the early fifties. In April 1954 Los Angeles Stock Exchange president W. G. Paul marked the beginning of Invest in America week with a speech titled “Capitalism is Americanism”; Later that year the *Bulletin* explained Thomas Edison’s prodigious inventing career as an indictment of modern government “stifling” of business through regulation and income tax. In 1956, Herbert Kohler, president of the Kohler Company, told Club-goers the lamentable tale of his two-year battle with striking workers at his plumbingware plant in Wisconsin. Workers had struck after management walked out of negotiations over a union contract; Kohler claimed more than eight hundred acts of violence had since been visited upon his plant and his strikebreakers, including gunshots, paint bombings, the dynamiting of vehicles and buildings, acid throwing, window smashing, the poisoning of pigs and the slashing of dairy cows.¹⁷⁵

Mental Health — specifically the fear, articulated by Gene Birkeland and others, that Soviet-style detention camps were being prepared for supposedly disturbed conservative activists — was frequently discussed at First Congregational. In the

¹⁷⁴ *Freedom Club Bulletin*, 13 March 1952, 2 July 1953, 1 October 1953, 11 February 1954, 29 March 1955, 19 April 1955, 3 May 1955, 13 March 1952.

¹⁷⁵ *Freedom Club Bulletin*, 22 May 1952, 7 January 1954, 6 May 1954, 26 October 1954; *Los Angeles Times*, 18 April 1956, p. 34.

spring of 1955, the *Bulletin* reprinted an editorial that offered bleak caution against “[t]he clenched fist beating on the door at midnight, the swift, brisk visit of the secret police, the hasty departure of a ‘former citizen’”; a year later Municipal Court judge Joseph Call addressed Club members on the “Constitutional Threats” in the impending Alaska Mental Health Enabling Act.¹⁷⁶

Most strikingly, an entire edition of Spiritual Mobilization monthly *Faith and Freedom* was devoted to the cause of Lucille and Manuel Miller, two Vermont anticommunists whose dramatic battles with federal authorities made them iconic figures of the fringe and far right in the mid-fifties. The Millers, from the tiny mill town of Bethel, styled themselves directors of a grassroots counter-subversive group called the National Patrick Henry Organization, Inc., and published a conspiracist, often explicitly anti-Semitic, mimeographed sheet called *The Green Mountain Rifleman*. When Lucille Miller wrote letters to nine local draftees, enclosing copies of the *Rifleman* and advising them how to dodge their military service, she was arrested. Deemed unfit to stand trial by local psychiatrists, she was ordered to a federal mental institution for further assessment: a decision which prompted a twelve-hour armed stand-off with Manuel Miller, only ended when state troopers fired tear gas into the Millers’ home. During Lucille Miller’s subsequent month-long incarceration the couple wrote vivid letters describing their struggle and denouncing their government

¹⁷⁶ *Los Angeles Times*, 27 May 1959, p. 24; *Freedom Club Bulletin*, 22 March 1955, 19 April 1955. See chapter four for more on grassroots conservative opposition to mental health legislation.

tormentors, and found a national audience via sympathetic tabloid columnist Westbrook Pegler.¹⁷⁷

The Miller case tapped into multiple right-wing narratives: suspicion of state intrusion into private American lives; fears of insidious progressive science used for nefarious means; resentment at a liberal, communist-infiltrated administration that sought to silence conservative views; celebration of a right-thinking individual's willingness to defend themselves, violently if necessary, against federal tyranny. Yet the extremist views of its protagonists made it a problematic totem for any right-wing organization aspiring to mainstream authority, which Spiritual Mobilization and the Freedom Clubs certainly did. *Faith and Freedom* wrestled with this conundrum with a degree of sensitivity, its reporter distancing himself from the Millers' bigotry and telling Manuel "I think you are wrong about the Jewish people, but I don't want to see you lose your Constitutional rights". Nevertheless, the magazine's willingness to offer otherwise broad endorsement of the Millers' anti-government radicalism, and uncritically allow them space for such unconvincing rebuttals as the claim that "Jew" was simply the *Rifleman's* shorthand for "certain Jewish political organizations", showed the extent to which Fifield and his organization courted fringe elements of the grassroots right.¹⁷⁸

The Freedom Club also sent out mixed messages on the race issue. Fifield himself opposed government-mandated desegregation and criticized the efforts of civil-

¹⁷⁷ *Faith and Freedom*, September 1955, *Green Mountain Rifleman*, various issues, *Los Angeles Examiner*, various clippings, Box 46, Radical Right.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

rights campaigners to achieve it. In 1946, seven years after the Daughters of the American Revolution refused to allow African-American contralto Marian Anderson to perform for an integrated audience at their Washington, D.C., venue Constitution Hall, Fifield informed worshippers it that it was the ensuing protests — rather than the DAR's actions — that had been an “abomination unto the Lord”. Roosevelt's Fair Employment Practices Committee [FEPC], meanwhile, was deemed unnecessary as Fifield himself had “never found a single instance of discrimination” during his own investigation into the issue. Despite Fifield's personal enmity towards civil rights legislation, the Freedom Clubs — officially at least — maintained a non-discriminatory line.¹⁷⁹

In early 1954, the monthly *Freedom Club News* felt compelled to publish a front-page article rejecting the alleged promotion of “anti-Christian” racist speakers by local branches. In that same issue, director Oliver Carlson warned that the consequences of the group's increasing focus on television ministry and a national identity included the fact that “the local clubs will be more and more on their own but must be enjoined from continuing to use the FC name if they operate in violation of the covenant which they have signed with [Freedom Clubs, Inc.] and the spirit of that national organization.” Marie King underscored the apparent gulf between official policy and grassroots sentiment in 1958. Despite her long years of service, she reluctantly ended her family's association with First Congregational, writing to Fifield to explain that her daughter's exposure to integrationist literature at Sunday School had been the final straw. “It would be inconsistent for me to be writing letters against FEPC to Board of

¹⁷⁹ Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands*, p.73.

Supervisor members and the California Legislature,” she wrote, “only to send my child to church to learn ‘that civil rights and fair employment practice legislation are necessary because minority groups would get less than justice without them’.”¹⁸⁰

Alleged far right radicalism remained an issue throughout the Freedom Club’s early Cold War heyday, seemingly at odds with First Congregational’s community centrality and widespread popularity. In 1952, the FBI’s local field office privately informed Hoover that Fifield “seems to be more or less associated with extreme conservative elements in Los Angeles and [the] vicinity”. A KLAC-TV commentator named Dr Harold Story went considerably further, labelling Freedom Club attendees “Ku Kluxers in dinner jackets”, during a broadcast of the *Eddie Albert Show* that same year. The attack prompted an immediate demonstration of the Club’s grassroots mobilization: members quickly allied with Los Angeles-based anticommunist women’s group the Liberty Belles and began a phone campaign directed at every one of the programme’s sponsors. In the end, only two advertisers were successfully pressured to withdraw their backing — Laura Scudder Foods and kitchen appliance makers O’Keefe and Merritt — but the protest achieved its wider goal. Eddie Albert’s producers apologized for Story’s remarks and announced he would no longer be a guest on the show.¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 25 September 1952, p. A2; *Freedom Club News*, January-February 1954, Box 9, Radical Right; Nickerson, “Politically Desperate Housewives”.

¹⁸¹ “SAC Los Angeles to JEH report”, 18 August 1952, in HQ file (no serial #), FOIA notes belonging to Ernie Lazar; *Variety*, 23 April 1952; *Ibid.*, 28 May 1952, p.38.

One form of extremism that rarely surfaced at First Congregational was religious extremism. Though he stood opposed to the moderate, socially liberal Protestantism represented by the NCC, Fifield's personal conception of Christianity bore little of the doctrinaire fundamentalism of many of his Cold War co-religionists. As Brooks Walker put it in his polemic *The Christian Fright Peddlers*, the pastor was "probably one of the most theologically liberal and at the same time politically conservative ministers in the continuing Congregational movement". Fifield acknowledged the Bible was not an infallible record of God's word, and described studying the text as "like eating fish — we take the bones out to enjoy the meat. All parts are not of equal value." According to Toy, the minister's spiritual concerns were secondary to his faith in anticommunism and the "essentially secular 'religious nationalism' of the American business creed". Indeed, where politics and theology intersected at the Freedom Club, it was over issues like the alleged red infiltration of churches and the biblical imperative to reject the welfare state, rather than theological disputes or moral crusades.¹⁸²

James Fifield's First Congregational Church network in general — and the Freedom Club in particular — occupied a unique space within the landscape of the religious right and Cold War Californian conservatism, its prominence the result of an unusual combination of characteristics. The charismatic pastor's scripture-based celebration of personal wealth accumulation and disdain for government appealed to powerful, right-wing business leaders. At the same time, the consistent focus on conspiracy-minded anticommunism and local-level

¹⁸² Brooks R. Walker, *The Christian Fright Peddlers* (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1964), p.137; Toy, "Spiritual Mobilization", p.77.

counter-subversion at weekly Freedom Club meetings brought in a grassroots contingent that contributed significantly to the Southland's red scare. Meanwhile, the expansive and complex organizational structure of First Congregational's many services, clubs, charitable endeavours and business investments encouraged a broad range of community participation that enhanced the activist education of its Los Angeles constituency. Finally, the relatively liberal theology employed by Reverend Fifield, and his own personable image, ensured that the church maintained a mainstream appeal, even as it facilitated the fringe efforts of right-wing campaigners. It was a contradictory series of attributes, reflected in the FBI field office's somewhat conflicted observation that "[Fifield] is highly respected generally, although he is strongly criticized by some for his rather extreme views."¹⁸³

In matters of style and theological substance, Fifield's Freedom Clubs stood apart from California's burgeoning evangelical and fundamentalist scene. Nevertheless, there was significant shared ground to be found within the philosophical and economic underpinnings of "Freedom Under God" and those of the more religiously conservative movements that followed. Fundamentalists opposed any reform measures aimed at providing greater economic security for American citizens, not only as an affront to rugged individualism, but as an obstacle to true, heavenly salvation. As the popular evangelist Edgar Bundy explained it, "Jesus Christ was not interested in lobbying before Pilate, Agrippa, or Caesar's government for betterment of social, economic, or political

¹⁸³ "SAC Los Angeles to JEH report", 18 August 1952, in HQ file (no serial #), FOIA notes belonging to Ernie Lazar.

conditions [...] He left his followers no legacy in the form of material comforts and a high standard of living.” Likewise, Carl McIntire explained that “[t]he command, ‘Thou shalt not steal,’ gives divine sanction to private property, and a system of economy built upon it.”¹⁸⁴

Fifield invited a number of prominent fundamentalists and Christian conservatives to speak at Freedom Club events, even as his own ministry turned ever further from dogmatic religiosity as the 1950s progressed. Of considerably greater interest to the pastor, however, was a new force for more secular conservatism: Robert Welch’s John Birch Society [JBS]. In April 1961 the pastor hosted Welch on his Los Angeles television programme before the Freedom Club sponsored a speech by the rising anticommunist leader at the Shrine Auditorium a few days later. Fifield denied being a JBS member, but called the organization “a very important enterprise that might help save our freedoms”. His patronage of Welch marked a symbolic passing of the torch between the early Cold War counter-subversive right and the emerging libertarian “new right” of the 1960s.¹⁸⁵

Of all the sub-groups in American society who were perceived to have reacted, in some consistent way, to the red scare, Catholics were viewed as perhaps the most enthusiastic red haters. For one thing, as Donald Crosby points out, they were thought to be among the most dedicated and vigorous supporters of their co-religionist Joseph McCarthy. Like much of the analysis of popular

¹⁸⁴ Ellsworth and Harris, “The American Right Wing”, p.12; “Bishop Oxnam: Prophet of Marx”, Folder 9-1057, Box 6, *Counterattack* Files.

¹⁸⁵ Toy, “Spiritual Mobilization”, p.80; *New York Times*, 9 April 1961.

anticommunism that took place during the 1950s, this idea stemmed mainly from assumption and flawed theorising about “status anxiety” — the idea that Catholics, as a traditionally embattled minority, would be eager to preserve recent, hard-won gains by undermining the “American-ness” of others. Samuel Stouffer’s statistical examination offers some hard evidence to back up the popular reading. According to his figures, churchgoing Catholics in the northern states were significantly less tolerant of socialists and non-conformists than their Protestant peers, although southern Protestants, both frequent and occasional church attendees, were less tolerant still. In reality, as with the rest of American society, it was not Catholicism as a faith, but conservative Catholicism (as a religious dogma) and conservative Catholics (as an ideological sub-group) that demonstrated the most aggressive anticommunism. These Catholics hated communism not as a unique, totalitarian threat, but as the most egregious example of egalitarian economic philosophies, modern social practices and internationalist foreign policy ideas that they also hated. Liberal Catholics, while perhaps more concerned with Soviet expansion than the average liberal American, generally subscribed to a more moderate, mainstream approach — one that was vigorously antagonistic towards communism, but did not favour a wholesale abandonment of civil liberties in order to combat it domestically, nor a broadening of its definition to encompass all progressive thought.¹⁸⁶

Nevertheless, there were some general traits in the American Catholic response to the Cold War. From the earliest days of communism, the popes had

¹⁸⁶ Donald F. Crosby, “The Politics of Religion: American Catholics and the Anti-Communist Impulse”, in Griffith and Theorharis, ed., *The Specter*, p.20; Stouffer, *Communism, Conformity and Civil Liberties*, p.144.

condemned the materialism, atheism and public ownership of the Marxist ideal. Once it became apparent that the Russian Revolution had led to suffering among Russian Catholics, the animosity only increased and started to become a defining feature of religious practice for ordinary American believers. According to Crosby, “prayers for the ‘conversion of Russia’ and sermons on the ‘sorrows of the Russian people’ became staples of American Catholic piety, repeated almost monotonously in Catholic churches from Boston to San Francisco.” For a majority of Catholics — liberal Democratic voters — this opposition to Soviet actions abroad was as far as it went. However, even prior to the Cold War, there was evidence of a populist Catholic constituency for more conservative minded, domestically focussed anticommunist intrigue. Both Father Charles Coughlin, the immensely influential Catholic “radio priest”, and the Brooklyn *Tablet*, the largest circulation Catholic newspaper, attacked the New Deal as a first step towards communist rule in the United States. The *Tablet* continued to share a political platform with Coughlin, even as his populist message turned increasingly towards anti-Semitic conspiracism. While radio station after radio station cancelled the priest’s ever more noxious talks, the Catholic journal continued to provide faithful front-page transcriptions for its appreciative readership. Editor Patrick Scanlan reported that the newspaper received 3,150 letters regarding Coughlin during November and December of 1938 alone, and that only 42 of them were critical. The *Tablet* further reflected its eagerness to tolerate right-wing extremism in opposition to radical leftism in its consistent support and successful fundraising efforts for General Franco’s Spanish dictatorship: for

which, in 1951, Scanlon was awarded the honorary Knight Commander of the Order of Isabella the Catholic by the Spanish Government.¹⁸⁷

Under Scanlan's editorship, the *Tablet* embraced anticommunism wholeheartedly during the early Cold War. With a readership of over one hundred thousand, the newspaper had considerable influence in New York City and beyond, and, even outside of the red issue, maintained an uncompromisingly conservative political and theological stance — as spelled out by Scanlan, “[a] liberal Catholic [...] if he has any brains or backbone [...] will realize the term liberal implies a willingness to compromise the Church's authority”. The paper became arguably the most consistent popular voice in support of Senator McCarthy. It repeatedly celebrated the senator and the tactics he employed — most famously, in a 10 June 1950 front-page editorial headlined “Put Up or Shut Up”, which not only sought to rally support for the under-fire red hunter, but actively attempted to engage readers in a grassroots struggle, instructing them to write to their senators and representatives and demand to know exactly what they were doing about the problem of communists in government. In November 1954, the paper collaborated with the Catholic War Veterans to collect signatures for a petition protesting the senator's censure. As well as direct endorsement of McCarthyism and similar counter-subversive efforts, the newspaper consistently articulated planks of the wider Cold War conservative-anticommunist ideology, through articles such as its investigation into the “menace” of “socialized medicine”, its “critical analysis of world government”,

¹⁸⁷ Crosby, *God, Church and Flag*, p.5; Alden V. Brown, *The Tablet: The First Seventy-Five Years* (Brooklyn: Tablet Publishing Company, 1983) pp. 36-44.

and its elaborate promotion of Loyalty Day and similar patriotic celebrations. Foreign affairs were also comprehensively covered, with dismal accounts of life under communist rule in Europe sharing space with glowing descriptions of fascist Spain — “communism’s most steadfast foe”.¹⁸⁸

If the *Brooklyn Tablet* was the principal propaganda arm of popular Catholic anticommunism during the early Cold War, then Francis Cardinal Spellman was the symbolic leader of the movement. The Archbishop of New York was the most powerful Catholic clergyman in America, and a close associate of Franklin Roosevelt before his increasingly vocal suspicions of Soviet influence turned him against the President. From the moment the Cold War began Spellman sermonized these fears of “communist conquest and annihilation” for audiences of up to three-and-a-half thousand from the pulpit of St. Patrick’s Cathedral in midtown Manhattan. Time and again he lectured churchgoers on acts of communist treachery within America, which apparently included the fomentation of anti-Catholic bigotry, in screeds that were reprinted and circulated in the Catholic and mainstream press. Even more frequent were laments for the fate of Catholic clergy behind the Iron Curtain, particularly imprisoned Hungarian cardinal Joseph Mindszenty, a tragic hero and rallying symbol to Catholics worldwide. “When will the American Government, the American people and the leaders in all phases of American life raise their voices in one and cry out against Satan-inspired Communist crimes?” Spellman demanded in 1949, on a day of prayer and protest for the priest. Three years

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.44 and 48; *Tablet*, 14 January 1950, p.4; *Ibid.*, 25 February 1950, p.12; *Ibid.*, 11 March 1950, p.18; *Ibid.*, 10 June 1950, p.1.

earlier he had led a fundraising drive that brought in some \$4 million in donations towards the building of an Archbishop Aloysius Stepinac High School in New York, in honour of another Soviet-incarcerated Catholic martyr. The Cardinal was aided in his anticommunist crusade by the Catholic fraternal organization Knights of Columbus, which hosted the Archbishop as a guest on the red-baiting radio programme it broadcast on over two hundred stations. Spellman also engaged in some direct, local-level action against fellow Catholics he considered subversive, accusing workers at one of his church's cemeteries of "Communistic" tactics when they struck for a five day work week.¹⁸⁹

While Cardinal Spellman and the *Tablet* loudly conveyed hard-line anticommunist rhetoric to a broad cross-section of the American Catholic public, soliciting prayers and donations for the European anti-Soviet cause, more self-directed grassroots Catholic activism is less well documented. Crosby explains that some of the most "extreme right-wing" Catholics, particularly in Southern California, formed "Mindszenty Circles" to lobby, campaign and plot in the spirit of the victimized Hungarian prelate. These secretive societies — Crosby cites only "confidential sources" as testament to their existence — nevertheless wielded significant influence, particularly with priests, a number of whom apparently signed up for the cause. More obvious examples of Catholic community organizing occurred through the Catholic War Veterans. Like their ex-service fellows in the American Legion and VFW, the CWV followed a strict anticommunist line at an organizational level, and participated in acts of local-

¹⁸⁹ Crosby, "The Politics of Religion", in Griffith and Theoharis, ed., *The Specter*, pp. 25-29. *New York Times*, 4 March 1949; *Ibid.*, 5 March 1949; *Ibid.*, 9 March 1949; *Ibid.*, 10 March 1949; *Ibid.*, 11 March 1949.

level counter-subversion on a post-by-post basis. In November 1949, national leadership of the two-hundred-thousand-strong organization launched an education campaign involving courses on recognizing communists and fellow travellers. Earlier that year, members of the Peekskill, New York, CWV had been active participants in the town's anticommunist riots — as discussed in Chapter one — while, in 1950, the commander of the Queens, New York, post contributed to a co-ordinated telephone protest that resulted in the firing of the supposedly red-sympathizing actress Jean Muir from the NBC sitcom *The Aldrich Family*. Four years after that, in a more low-key but no less successful action, a committee of Red Bank, New Jersey, CWV members successfully protested the screening of an Anti-Defamation League educational film as part of a school PTA event. The local ADL chairman described the cancellation of the “pink” picture as “an act of hysteria and know-nothingism beyond belief.”¹⁹⁰

In terms of the wider legacy of popular Catholic anticommunism in the early Cold War, the picture was mixed. By the 1952 presidential elections, the normally solid Catholic Democratic vote had declined from around sixty-five per cent to fifty-three, and it fell a further handful of points at the 1956 election, suggesting that the Cold War had indeed effected a rightward turn in general Catholic thought, before the nomination of John F. Kennedy inspired an overwhelming swing back to the Democrats in 1960. Both the *Tablet* and Cardinal Spellman continued to fight reds as the 1950s progressed. Late in the decade, when the majority of even the right-wing press had cooled on the red issue, the Brooklyn

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 8 November 1949, p.13, *Ibid.*, 3 September 1950, p.49; *Hartford Courant*, 12 March 1954, p.27C; Crosby, “The Politics of Religion”, in Griffith and Theoharis ed., *The Specter*, p.27.

newspaper maintained its uncompromising stance, publishing — and producing one million reprints by popular request, according to editor Scanlan — a tract by Monsignor William McGrath that prophesized communist takeover in America within a few years.¹⁹¹

It is hardly surprising that grassroots anticommunism in America had a religious component. Quite apart from the activist core, the national dialogue framed the Cold War in existential terms that invited spiritual reflection. America became more religious under the threat of atomic catastrophe, and the global Cold War of ideas was framed in an ever more religiously resonant way: whether as a battle between faith and atheistic materialism, or, more vividly, between God and the Devil. With even moderate establishment voices demanding a sort of fundamentalist Americanism in the face of an alien enemy, in a conflict that defied such mundane explanations as economic rivalry or geopolitical self-interest, it made sense for women such as Gene Birkeland and Marie King, for the followers of Billy Graham and James Fifiield, to seek guidance and draw strength from the anticommunist convictions of their religious leaders. The urgency of the situation required, from the most committed Christian activists as from the most committed secular crusaders, a radical response. “The mentality of this group is such that historical development is reduced to conspiratorial agreements made by the emissaries of Hades,” argued Brooks Walker. “They feel that they have, therefore, an obligation to enter into a counterconspiracy of righteousness.”¹⁹²

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p.37; Brown, *The Tablet*, p.51.

¹⁹² Walker, *The Christian Fright Peddlers*, p.109.

In terms of a specific response to the red scare, things become more complex. Billy Graham, James Fifiield and Carl McIntire denounced godless communism with the same righteous belief but the utility of such rhetoric to their specific ideological goals, and its impact on the ordinary citizens who came to hear them sermonize, varied greatly. Graham preached a conservative, red-baiting gospel but was not interested in recruiting citizens to investigate their neighbours for un-American tendencies. His inclusive, Southern plain-folk preaching style made him a global celebrity and helped elevate evangelical discourse to one of the most significant forms of political and social practice in the nation: but his triumph says more about general trends towards a more conservative Christian ideology than about the potency of community-level anticommunism. McIntire's McCarthyist denunciations of his fellow clergy contributed to a gradual tilting of Protestantism's philosophical scales from liberality to conservatism, but in the short term served more to boost his own celebrity than community anticommunist participation. For fundamentalist agitators like Hargis and Schwarz, too, counter-subversion was a practical goal as well as a subject for spiritual reflection; Yet these hard-liners owed most of their enduring influence to later political context, an era of aggressive religious organizing inspired more by the "no-holds-barred" Goldwater campaign than the intrigue of the early Cold War red scare.¹⁹³

Most noteworthy of all was the case of James Fifiield and his Freedom Clubs. The Clubs provided a crucial space where the multiple, sometimes contradictory threads of early Cold War conservative rhetoric could meet, and influence a core

¹⁹³ Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt*, p.270.

constituency of prosperous, God-fearing Southlanders. Club activists directly engaged in local-level anticommunist action — such as the anti-UNESCO schools campaign — and there was frequent crossover between Fifield's congregation and the membership rolls of other major grassroots groups. With conservative women, especially, enthusiastic subscription to Fifield's vision often preceded future militancy; for them, First Congregational offered a transitional experience where normative notions of female church participation could fuse with more transgressive ideas of women-led political advocacy.

The Freedom Club concept presented a coherent, practical plan for mobilizing churchgoers via education, propaganda, discussion and mass participation, and for translating the Apostle to Millionaires' essentially elitist economic fixations into a populist rhetoric of Christian Americanism. It was not always successful in its aims. Direct politicking produced mixed results, with the 1953 anti-public housing mayoral success of church member Norris Poulson contrasting starkly with the disastrous 1958 alliance with William Knowland's gubernatorial campaign. Unlike most of the other groups discussed in this thesis, First Congregational's endeavours were also highly reliant on the charisma and vision of one man — James Fifield — for their financial prosperity and mainstream appeal; when, for instance, he stepped down as head of Spiritual Mobilization, the group's fortunes declined notably. Also, for all its 1950s achievement, the combination of economic conservatism and religious liberalism promoted at Los Angeles' First Congregational Church — even its downtown location — put it starkly out of step with the rising trend of Southern-style evangelicalism and socially conservative suburban megachurches.

Still, the Freedom Clubs provide symbolic connective tissue: from the old anti-New Deal economic libertarianism of Spiritual Mobilization through the McCarthyism-influenced, Cold War-rooted grassroots campaigns of activists like Lillian Moore Roberts, Ruth Cole and Edith Stafford, to the conspiracist, ultra-conservative new world of the John Birch Society. Religious anticommunist activism did not shape the early Cold War as obviously as some other factors, but in form of the Freedom Clubs especially, it prefigured two of the most significant trends of the late twentieth century grassroots American right. In its ideas, its high-profile associates, even some of its ordinary members, the Freedom Clubs project spawned elements of both the politically engaged, community focussed, morally conservative Christian right and the anti-government, libertarian right of the JBS, Tea Party and others.

Chapter Four

Atom Bombs and Rolling Pins:

Women, Gender and Community Activism

In November 1949, two-and-a-half months before Senator McCarthy revealed the alleged existence of 205 communists in the State Department to a meeting of Republican women in Wheeling, West Virginia, another group of female conservatives gathered in New Haven's YWCA hall to plot a crusade against Cold War subversion. There was no ambitious senator among them nor did they claim to represent the partisan establishment. These were Connecticut mothers and housewives, well-dressed and well-off. They lived in the neat, prosperous towns that today make up the north-eastern reaches of New York City's commuter hinterlands. They boasted no particular knowledge of the inner-workings of Washington, nor could they offer such a remarkably detailed account of communist intrigue as Joseph McCarthy. Rather the Connecticut women spoke of more general fears for the safety of "the free American Way of Life", and discussed a range of liberal and left-wing crimes — from the State Department's putative betrayal of US interests abroad to domestic intrigues such as "hidden taxes", the expanding welfare state, "progressive" education, and conspiracies in the mental health system.¹⁹⁴

Within two years, Minute Women of the USA, Inc., as they became, were a nationwide organization with chapters in nearly every state, a widely distributed newsletter and a membership numbering in the tens of thousands. They were,

¹⁹⁴ Bridgeport, CT, *Sunday Herald*, 4 December 1949, p.39.

according to Michael Heale, the “most significant” of the myriad newly formed patriotic groups fighting domestic subversion in the early Cold War years. Their importance was not just in terms of numbers or contemporary notoriety — their leader was a tireless self-publicist; their actions made them liberal hate-figures — but also through the wider implications of a brief heyday, and their embodiment of an emerging trend in American politics. The Minute Women, along with contemporaries such as the Liberty Belles, the Network of Patriotic Letter Writers, the American Public Relations Forum and the school board activists of Los Angeles and Pasadena, reshaped McCarthyism for the ultra-domestic sphere and, in doing so, suggested a model for community activism that would be emulated by right-wing American women for decades to come.¹⁹⁵

“Anticommunism in America,” as Mary C. Brennan puts it, “was a gendered affair”. At a surface level, the language of the early Cold War skewed hypermasculine: “tailgunner” Joe McCarthy as the rugged hero sniffing out elitist treachery in pampered Washington circles, on-screen and real life G-men hunting reds like they were Mafiosi hoodlums rather than Marx-reading intellectuals, pulp fiction’s Mike Hammer seducing female spies and brutally dispatching “commies” in the most luridly macho manner imaginable. Here was a strange paradox by which communist agents could at once be the voracious villains of crime movie archetype and effeminate “pinkoes” betrayed by their education and elitism into perversions both sexual and political. At one gendered extreme, Jack Lait and Lee Mortimer’s 1952 red scare bestseller *U.S.A. Confidential* painted a vivid picture of debauched CP heterosexuality. “Female

¹⁹⁵ Heale, *McCarthy’s Americans*, p.68.

card-holders are required to show their loyalty to the cause through indiscriminate intercourse wherever it will do the most good," they reported. "Sex is offered as an inducement to comrades for attending meetings. Most soirees of the faithful end up with vodka toasts in dim candlelight. Negro men get the first choice of white women. An indoctrinated girl may whimsically turn down a white man, but never a Negro. That is racial intolerance".¹⁹⁶

Lait and Mortimer's fellow Hearst columnist Westbrook Pegler, by contrast, offered a rather different take on communist inter-personal relationships, in the form of a supposedly comic poem entitled "Three Whoops And A Yoo-Hoo For The State Department":

How could he help it if parties both unusual and queer
 Got into the State Department, which all patriots hold dear?
 To hear the dastards tell it, they are true to Uncle Joey
 And call each other female names, like Bessie, Maude, and Chloe.¹⁹⁷

But while tabloid columnists wondered whether it was most effective to ridicule communists in coarsely chauvinistic, racist or homophobic terms, another gendered discourse was playing out. Articles in *Life* ("US envoy's wife finds Moscow modes high priced, wide shouldered, not very handsome") and *Look* ("Nowhere in the world is female beauty held in such low esteem — needless to

¹⁹⁶ Brennan, *Wives, Mothers, and the Red Menace*, p.147; Jack Lait and Lee Mortimer, *U.S.A. Confidential* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1952), p.52, quoted in Miller and Nowak, *The Fifties*, p.35.

¹⁹⁷ Jim Tuck, *McCarthyism and New York's Hearst Press: A Study of Roles in the Witch Hunt* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1995), p.80.

say, there is no ‘Miss USSR’”) framed the ideological and lifestyle differences between the USA and Soviet Russia in starkly feminized terms. To be a woman in early Cold War America, the lifestyle magazines implied, was to live in a world where “normal” American gender values were under particular threat. These anxieties mirrored concerns over domestic changes that were putting women’s traditional societal roles on a new, less certain footing — increasing prosperity, the revolution in consumerism, the burgeoning generational conflict. At the same time, the American domestic sphere was in apparent physical danger as never before — from new weapons that respected no battlefield, from an unconventional “war” that was being fought in the classrooms and school libraries of America. With international combat intermittent and far away, the early Cold War was at its most real on the home front. It is no surprise that women, as Brennan contends, were intimately involved with all aspects of anticommunism, particularly at a grassroots level.¹⁹⁸

For right-wing women, the battle for America’s Cold War soul offered new opportunities to make their voice heard. Their input highlighted the evolving social framework for such activism — from the ultra-traditionalist likes of the Daughters of the American Revolution to newer groupings, who saw their conservative ideology in quasi-feminist terms and set about adapting the politics of privilege to the growing middle-class sprawl of suburban America. Individual, iconoclastic anticommunist women emerged on the fringes of the Washington establishment — Brennan illuminates some of these, including the journalist

¹⁹⁸ “Iron Curtain Look Is Here”, *Life*, 10 March 1952, “Women: Russia’s Second-Class Citizens”, *Look*, 30 November 1954, Both quoted in Barson and Heller, *Red Scared*, p.129; Brennan, *Mothers, Wives, and the Red Menace*, p.154.

Elizabeth Churchill Brown, Maine senator Margaret Chase Smith, senatorial wife and campaigner Doloris Bridges and Jean Kerr McCarthy, wife of Joseph. On the outer edges of political life, meanwhile, a Washington, D.C., woman named Agnes Waters argued in Congress against the Marshall Plan in 1948 and the extension of the draft law in 1955, and ran as a write-in candidate at every presidential election from 1944 to 1960, using the admittedly divisive slogan “for my country — against the Jews”.¹⁹⁹

Beyond these lone voices of varying influence, however, something more substantial was building. No kind of unified mass movement, to be sure, but dozens, maybe hundreds, of locally focused, female-led anticommunist alliances, that ranged in size from front room coffee klatches to national organizations capable of filling halls and pressuring the political status quo. In Des Moines, Iowa, for instance, a group calling themselves the Christian Association of Public Affairs was formed to “ferret out communists and criminals” who were apparently hiding within local police departments, old folks’ homes, political organizations and other civic institutions. Consisting of some one hundred and fifty middle-aged members — including around one hundred and thirty women — and led by an auctioneer’s wife named Mrs Millard, the various housewives, doctors, stenographers and lawyers styled themselves “secret investigators”, conducting their vocation in the manner of the most hard-boiled Raymond Chandler anti-hero. Most imaginatively, the women posed as drunks in order to slip unnoticed among Des Moines’ bar scene — “Sometimes a member will stage a fight to add to the realism,” Millard explained. While the CAPA was cagey about

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid*; Agnes Waters flyers and reprints, Folder 53, Box 4, Right-Wing Pamphlets.

the actual subversion uncovered in Des Moines, they did claim success in a more everyday civic engagement: thanks to their telephone activism a pothole was repaired and an abandoned Des Moines bus line reinstated.²⁰⁰

Under-the-radar and sporadically active, female-led community anticommunists nevertheless utilized gendered ideas and gender-specific actions to innovative and influential effect — portraying themselves as concerned mothers, Liberty Belles and feisty females, as willing to drop an atom bomb in defence of conservative American values as wield a rolling pin. At the same time, contemporary reporters and critics used gendered, often sexist language to describe the phenomenon of politically active, middle-class women. While never going so far as to suggest the amateur counter-subversives should — in the words of one Des Moines policeman — “go home and take care of their own families”, a faint air of amused condescension permeated much of the mainstream journalism on the subject. The Minute Women were often “Minute Gals” and their marches “petticoat parades”, while the members themselves, at least when aroused about some more outrageous claim of leftist treachery, were said to be “semi-hysterical” rather than merely angry or wrongheaded.²⁰¹

Perhaps the gender-defined distinction most pertinent to conservative women’s political involvement during the early Cold War was simple practicality. The comfortably off suburban and small town housewives who made up the bulk of

²⁰⁰ *Hartford Courant*, 16 May 1954, p.10; The Des Moines anticommunists’ more community-minded endeavours should not be overlooked. Twelve years later, at the opposite end of the political spectrum, Oakland’s newly founded Black Panther Party established their activist credentials by successfully demanding a traffic light be installed at a dangerous intersection.

²⁰¹ *Hartford Courant*, 16 May 1954, p.10; *Sunday Herald*, Feb 18 1950, p.32; Hendersonville, NC, *Times-News*, 12 April 1951, p.1.

the membership of women's grassroots organizations — whether they came to their convictions independently or shared them with their husbands — were often the members of their community best placed to engage in activism. According to Millard, the followers of her CAPA were mostly in their late thirties or older and, with no children at home, able to let the housework that would otherwise be their primary duty go neglected while they undertook their counter-subversive activities. Michelle Nickerson argues that the lives of 1960s conservative women were “highly conducive to grassroots political work well before the women's liberation movement”; the same is true for their early Cold War forebears.²⁰²

Nickerson's scholarship on the so-called Goldwater Girls and their fellow 1960s conservatives is just one of several recent attempts to redress the traditional historical neglect of grassroots conservatism in general, and the female right-wing in particular. The most celebrated of these texts is probably Lisa McGirr's *Suburban Warriors*, which looks primarily at those she terms the “kitchen-table activists” of Orange County: middle-and-upper class men and, especially, women who came of political age in a sort of alternative sixties, an affluent, sun-bleached world of modern housing tracts, John Birch Society membership and deep resistance to the perceived liberal order. According to McGirr, these suburbanites “fundamentally shaped the course of American politics” during the sixties by “recasting [it] in ways comparable to the upheavals of the New Deal”, despite the seeming “obscurity” of their efforts at the time. Her thesis is that,

²⁰² Michelle Nickerson, “Moral Mothers and Goldwater Girls”, in Farber and Roche ed., *The Conservative Sixties* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), p.62.

while contemporary commentators and most subsequent scholars focused on the achievements of the left in the sixties — the March on Washington, the anti-Vietnam War protests, the counter-cultural explosion in San Francisco — an equal, perhaps more radical evolution was taking place on the right, relatively unnoticed and overshadowed by the superficial failures of the Goldwater wing of the GOP. This evolution, forged in the kitchens of Orange County and elsewhere, “recast the party of Lincoln from the moderate Republicanism of the eastern Wall Street establishment into a southern and western mold of a far more conservative bent”, ultimately propelling the rightward shift in American politics that culminated, in McGirr’s view, with the Reagan presidency of the 1980s.²⁰³

One problem with McGirr’s compelling narrative is that, in framing her unfashionable but influential “suburban warriors” in contrast to the more photogenic liberal and left-wing activists of the era, she in some ways perpetuates the myths of sixties exceptionalism she is trying to counter. There are many reasons for the cultural potency of the idea of the 1960s as the essential decade, culturally speaking, of the twentieth century. For one, it was an era of numerous radical shifts — in racial and sexual politics; in the foregrounding of youth-oriented culture, film and music; in the liberalization of societal norms — although few of these seismic developments happened without significant roots that extended back into earlier eras. More than simply as the sum of its eventfulness, however, the power of the sixties’ image stems from the mass exposure its upheavals received (particularly through the then widely-available medium of colour television) and the idealized memories and latterday

²⁰³ McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, pp.5-6.

influence of those who grew up during those years, the so-called baby boomer generation. By beginning her own narrative in 1960, McGirr offers a sharp and persuasive contrast, but ignores any continuities with earlier forms of grassroots conservatism. In effect, she suggests her kitchen-table activists were less their own creation than part of a backlash against the “progressive sixties” ideal.

Donald Critchlow is another scholar who has sought to redeem right-wing women through historical analysis. Unlike McGirr’s study, his *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism* connects the Goldwater presidential campaign of 1964 and the anti-Equal Rights Amendment battles of the 1970s with the era of McCarthyism and anticommunism. However, his survey of the early Cold War grassroots right is brief and necessarily slanted toward his biographical subject. For instance, while it is true that, as Critchlow notes, Phyllis Schlafly produced a right-wing reading list pamphlet that was recommended by the *American Legion Magazine* in 1957, it was not a significant coup on her part. Such documents had been popular currency among the anticommunist movement for a decade or more. Indeed, the distribution of mail order book catalogues and recommendations of right-wing literature seems to have been the prime method by which the loose network of patriotic societies, right-wing groups, FBI-backed investigators and individual newsletter writers sustained its correspondence levels throughout the red scare age. Critchlow acknowledges the significance of grassroots anticommunism — were it not for the combination of it and intellectual conservative writing, he argues, “the conservative movement would have languished without a coherent alternative to the liberal regime” — but in

focussing on one “woman’s crusade”, he gives scant regard to its particulars and diversity.²⁰⁴

Mary C. Brennan offers the most substantial survey to date of female involvement in early Cold War anticommunism, not only untangling the problematic quasi-feminism of some prominent conservative women of the era, but also separating the pervasive idea of McCarthyite “hysteria” from red-baiting’s profound political usefulness. “Although there was legitimate fear of what the communists might do abroad, at home the anxiety became entangled with the multiplicity of other changes taking place,” she writes. “Frequently it was hard to tell whether conservatives truly feared a ‘communist’ force at work or, more broadly the transformation of U.S. society threatened by political and social change”. Yet Brennan’s pioneering work leaves much room for further investigation — in focusing on various prominent female figures with at least some connection to the political power structure, she neglects the experiences and motivations of those women who fought subversion far away from Washington, in their own communities, schools and libraries. These women campaigned against their communist enemies through the women’s auxiliaries of veterans organizations, and joined groups such as Pro-America, the Liberty Belles, the DAR and, most infamously, the Minute Women of the USA, Inc.²⁰⁵

The Minute Women tend to merit only a footnote in the scholarly literature. Indeed, *New American Right* grants them just that, observing merely that “the

²⁰⁴ Donald T. Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman’s Crusade* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp.39-41.

²⁰⁵ Brennan, *Wives, Mothers, and the Red Menace*, p.154.

Minute Women of America who buttonholed Senators on behalf of the Bricker Amendment are of course quite different in social position from the lower-class women who [...] praised Senator McCarthy as the only one in Washington who was cleaning out the crooks and the Commies” — an omission that possibly reflects the group’s divergence from the essayists’ thesis that grassroots anticommunism represented a populist, rural assault on enlightened elites. Brennan acknowledges they occasionally presented a “formidable force” and suggests they might have been the anticommunist organization of choice for women seeking a more conservative alternative to the venerable General Federation of Women’s Clubs. Richard Rovere provides a less measured analysis in his biography of McCarthy, calling them “bat-haunted”, an idea that suggests the Minute Women’s long-held fears they might be carted off to mental hospitals for thought crimes against the liberal establishment were not entirely of their own making. Rovere’s insult also imports a vaguely gothic air to the group, as though they were aging Cold War Miss Havishams, locked away in crumbling Connecticut piles, fearing communists like so many fraudulent suitors. A cheap shot, it may have been, but it is one that speaks to an interesting generational paradox in the image projected by the Minute Women, wherein they both embodied a stereotype of stuffy, fussily attired old reactionaries, and foreshadowed a more modern idea of independent, politically engaged conservative women.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁶ David Riesman and Nathan Glazer, “The Intellectuals and the Discontented Classes”, in Bell ed., *The Radical Right*, p.112; Heale, *McCarthy’s Americans*, p68; Brennan, *Wives, Mothers, and the Red Menace*, p.37; Rovere, *Senator Joe McCarthy*, p.21 and p.72.

The most in-depth scholarly account of Minute Women activities is found in *Red Scare*, in which Don Carleton explores grassroots anticommunist activity in Houston, Texas during the early 1950s, with a particular focus on the ousting of school superintendent George Ebey by a group of local activists including the city's Minute Women chapter. While it provides detailed and valuable insight into the scope and impact of the anti-Ebey actions, the text's usefulness in terms of understanding the motivations of the Minute Women is hampered by Carleton's obvious sympathy with, and focus on, the victims of this red-baiting exercise. As the book's subtitle — *Right-wing Hysteria, Fifties Fanaticism and Their Legacy in Texas* — suggests, *Red Scare* is not particularly interested in finding nuance or serious politics in the actions of homespun McCarthyites. In this attitude Carleton echoes contemporary liberal sentiment toward the Minute Women. While the group had numerous champions in the right-wing press, centrist and left-of-centre publications were generally more interested in the danger posed by these outspoken anticommunists than their ideas.²⁰⁷

The *Sunday Herald* of Bridgeport, Connecticut — effectively the Minute Women's local paper prior to their expansion onto the national scene — tempered its willingness to provide coverage and a mouthpiece for members with a healthy suspicion of what it called “an organization of rich women whose political beliefs are on the extreme right”. National liberal columnist Max Lerner was more forthright, calling the group “crackpot reactionaries” in a March 1952 missive. *The Nation* signaled the tone of its coverage in both the subtitle of its

²⁰⁷ Don E. Carleton, *Red Scare: Right-Wing Hysteria, Fifties Fanaticism, and their Legacy in Texas* (Austin: Texas Monthly Press, 1985).

investigation — “Daughters of Vigilantism” — and the cartoon it used to illustrate the piece: three cackling Minute Women crones, dressed in witches’ hats and revolutionary soldier garb, playing on pipes and drums. The author of the *Nation* article, Ralph O’Leary, was responsible for an award-winning series for the *Houston Post* on the city’s school board crisis. His reporting was actually more considered than the cartoon accompanying it suggested — it acknowledged the “shrewd setup” and effective tactics of the Minute Women — but, nevertheless, the overall intention of the *Nation* was to alert liberal and left-wing readers to the threat posed by an undemocratic organization, “top-heavy with the wives of [the] wealthy”, who were determined and able to exert influence beyond their numbers.²⁰⁸



Image 15: *The Nation*, 9 January 1954.

²⁰⁸ *Sunday Herald*, 3 September 1950; *Hartford Courant*, 20 March 1952, p.2; Ralph O’Leary, “Daughters of Vigilantism”, *The Nation*, 9 January 1954.

It is true that the Minute Women were often tactically ruthless, dogmatic to the point of intolerance in their belief in a particularly wide-ranging version of anticommunism, and that a number of their positions — especially their virulent opposition to UNESCO and suspicion of mental health legislation — were as marginal then as they seem now. Yet the liberal framing of them as either solely ridiculous or dangerous is both unfair and unhelpful. Right-wing organs looked far more favorably upon the Minute Women, but can be equally problematic in terms of their analysis. The *Chicago Tribune*, for instance, saw the apparent rise of patriotic, conservative organizations outside the GOP as a ringing endorsement of its own position that the Republican leadership was far too moderate and, as such, tended to take their pronouncements at face value and exaggerate the group's popularity. The Minute Women represented no mass rejection of liberal values and GOP moderation, whatever their boosters claimed, but nor were they a collection of disaffected kooks and vigilantes. They represented ideals shared by many on the right of American politics in the 1950s: It is how they went about enacting those ideals that makes them interesting, and also made them notorious.²⁰⁹

Reported in the local press under the titillating headline “Secret Ladies’ Session Bared”, the first official meeting of the group that would become the Minute Women took place in October 1949 in Lyme — a town known for boasting the lowest tax rate in Connecticut. For the birth scenes of new organization at the coalface of community politics, it was an unusually salubrious affair. No drafty

²⁰⁹ *Chicago Tribune*, 13 May 1950, p.12; Three years later, the *Tribune* would estimate the Minute Women membership at five hundred thousand, a far higher figure than cited anywhere else.

village halls or cramped front rooms for these local activists: instead an invitation-only get together at an estate on the banks of Hamburg Cove, a tranquil, wooded spur off the Connecticut River.²¹⁰

Today, Connecticut's Gold Coast is one of the wealthiest areas of America, with towns like Darien, New Canaan and Westport regularly topping lists of the richest in the nation. In 1950, however, the demographics were a little more complex. The neat villages and fledgling dormitory suburbs shared coastal real estate with small industrial centres. Bridgeport and Norwalk even had popular socialist mayors. After across-the-board Democratic control during the Depression years, Connecticut's state-wide politics had swung towards moderate Republicanism during the late 1940s: In the 1948 presidential elections, the state voted for Dewey over Truman by a margin of fifty per cent to forty-eight per cent. Though the conservative wing of the GOP had little foothold in the state as a whole by 1949, the Gold Coast's highly prosperous demographics, and the proximity of this wealth to relatively left-wing communities (both in-state and in the wider New York City metropolitan area) made the area as logical a place as any for the birth of an energetic new right-wing anticommunist force.²¹¹

Some five hundred women made their way to Jane Whithorne's estate, twenty-seven carloads from neighbouring Fairfield County alone, wending their way down lanes lined with New England's gaudy autumnal foliage, miniature American flags flitting from radiator caps. It was, announced organizer Suzanne

²¹⁰ *Sunday Herald*, 30 October 1949, p.13.

²¹¹ *Hartford Courant*, 3 August 1950, p.14.

Silvercruys Stevenson, “a spontaneous gathering of women who believe we are losing the American way of life”. This was a non-partisan association, Stevenson insisted, open to the female membership of both the Democratic and Republican parties; provided, naturally, they too were “disturbed over the rise of the welfare state and its hand-outs both here and about”. Forthcoming engagements were discussed, national ambitions mooted and ideals both general and specific were tabled. Despite the stated cross-party appeal, there was a distinct GOP hue to the most prominent figures at the meeting. Aside from the “wealthy” Mrs Whithorne, sponsors of the event included Mrs C. Frederic Beach, Mrs Ebba Reardon and Mrs Benjamin Andrews, three formerly active Republican Party workers.

Pet political projects on the agenda included opposition to the Connecticut state law regarding the so-called “attachment” of property in lawsuits. Hester McCullough, another prominent attendee, happened to be embroiled in a libel battle with entertainers Paul Draper and Larry Adler, and, with the case ongoing, the court had confiscated (or “attached”) some of her property in lieu of a bond against her walking out on the suit before it was concluded. The nationally known performing duo had sued McCullough when she accused them of being communists. Details are not known of the political or social status of the other attendees, but they were apparently quick to dip into their pockets when it was mentioned that McCullough had raised \$10,000 in defence fund contributions from outside Connecticut but only \$500 from residents of the Nutmeg State.

The two most distinguished visitors to Lyme that evening were Stevenson — at whose house the idea for this inaugural gathering had been first discussed —

and Vivien Kellems. Born into the Belgian political elites — her father was Chief Justice of the country, her brother became ambassador to the United States — Suzanne Silvercruys demonstrated her persuasive abilities, crusading zeal and media friendliness long before she set herself up as a guardian of the American way of life. As a teenager during World War One she escaped across the Atlantic and earned herself the nickname “The Maid from Flanders” in the US — and the highest military honour back home in Belgium — for her efforts lecturing on behalf of the Belgian war relief campaign. In 1922 she married the son of a Yale professor, became a naturalized American — a decision she would later argue made her a truer patriot than any native-born citizen — and took up a career as sculptor. Silvercruys’ artistic talents would prove an unlikely campaign tool — as well as creating likenesses of patriotic heroes such as Generals Wainwright, Doolittle, Chennault and Bradley, and celebrities including Katherine Hepburn and Jack Dempsey, she paid artistic tribute to her favoured political figures and enlivened stump speeches by sculpting members of her audiences in clay as she spoke. Her political education was expedited by her horror at the rise of communism back in Europe and her passionate embrace of her adopted country. In middle age she married for a second time, to former army colonel Edward Stevenson, an energetic self-publicist in his own right, who spent his retirement years performing public relations duties for the Minute Women, gaining local fame as an enthusiastic 57-year-old college freshman at the University of Connecticut, and, with his wife, serving as exclusive US distributor and pitchperson for a revolutionary new hair dye product called Grecian Formula. Amid all this activity the now Suzanne Stevenson found time to write a play,

There Is No Death, and a handful of books, including *Suzanne of Belgium*, *A Primer of Sculpture* and a political tome entitled *My American Credo*.²¹²

If anything, Vivien Kellems' achievements and commitment to a life spent in the public eye were even more remarkable. The only daughter of two ordained ministers and the sister of minister and West Los Angeles Republican assemblyman Jesse Randolph Kellems, she grew wealthy when her engineer younger brother invented a new type of cable grip, innovatively modelled on a child's "Chinese finger trap" toy. The young woman abandoned an economics PhD at Columbia University and, with support from another brother, David, set up the Kellems Company to promote the device. She proved an endlessly energetic pitchperson, reportedly securing her first contracts before the family business had even had a means to construct the product whose prototype she was hawking. The versatile grip was used in the construction of both the Empire State and Chrysler buildings and, in 1939, turned out to be equally adaptable to the demands of wartime production.²¹³

Kellems found national fame both as one of a handful of successful female industrialists in the country and as a glamorous socialite — she was twice voted onto national "best dressed" lists, admittedly in the presumably less hotly contested "business" category. During the war years, she enhanced her public profile through a series of personal political campaigns. Described variously as "pretty [...] and very feminine", "vivacious", "a slender, dimpled woman of

²¹² *Hartford Courant*, 29 April 1956, p.SM4.

²¹³ *New York Times*, 2 April 1939, p.51; *Los Angeles Times*, 10 October 1939, p.3.

youthful mien” and “the daintiest little atom bomb that ever wore skirts” in the many newspaper and magazine profiles that accompanied her rise to prominence, Kellems was a formidable protestor who utilized her femininity to subvert and challenge the male-dominated fields in which she operated. She fought against state legislation that prevented women from working nightshifts, as well as a law barring married women from the workplace at all, asking “Have we become so clever and ingenious that you are afraid of us?” In 1942 she made a vigorous attempt to secure a Republican congressional nomination, only to be thwarted by the entrance into the race of another exotic and outspoken electoral neophyte: playwright and journalist Clare Boothe Luce. Most notoriously, she launched herself into direct combat with the government by refusing, on principle, to deduct income tax payments from her workers’ wages.²¹⁴

Kellems’ self-styled “one-woman Westport [Connecticut] Tea Party” quickly saw her embroiled in an ugly public conflict, first with Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau — who suggested her refusal to pay tax on war profits amounted to disloyalty — then with liberal newspaper columnist Drew Pearson and Democratic congressman John Coffee. The latter opponents publicized intercepted love letters she had sent to an exiled German Count (and alleged Nazi agent) named Karl von Zedlitz as further evidence of seditious intent. Her response — switching the focus of outrage onto the exposure of her personal correspondence — was a deft manipulation of a chauvinistic political discourse that foreshadowed her later activism. In a few florid public statements she

²¹⁴ *Los Angeles Times*, 22 September 1940, p.112; *Hartford Courant*, 5 September 1942, p.2; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 6 April 1944, p.15; *Ibid.*, 25 January 1948, p.B5; *Hartford Courant*, 11 September 1940, p.6; *Ibid.*, 27 September 1941, p.5; *Ibid.*, 5 September 1942; *Ibid.*, 11 April 1947, p.4.

transformed her dubious legal and political position into one of moral superiority, an injured woman fighting a male establishment smear.²¹⁵

The Connecticut women continued to meet throughout November. The sessions remained private with no press coverage, logically enough — according to Dorothy Beach — as, “after all, we express ourselves pretty freely.” Still nameless, the group planned its public coming out for Tuesday, 29 November, with a meeting at New Haven’s YWCA hall. If the Lyme engagement had been discreet and genteel, the New Haven assembly was well publicised and, in the words of the *Sunday Herald’s* Hendrick, “riotous”. The four-hour gathering began in a celebratory mood as Stevenson gave an “impassioned prayer”, an invocation that would later be enshrined in Minute Women lore as “Our Prayer”. “Awaken in each one of us the sense of our personal civic responsibilities, and give us the desire, and the will, to fight to preserve the free American way of life,” she beseeched. Upon completion of the prayer Stevenson led the group in a salute to the flag.²¹⁶

The four hundred New Haven attendees dined on boxed lunches, patriotically packaged in white containers fastened with red and blue tape. The intention of achieving the group’s programme “in Connecticut in 1950 and the nation in 1952” was stated, though, as yet, that programme did not exist, save perhaps for in the personal ideals of Stevenson. These included a belief in labour, “but not Labour leaders”, the creation of diplomatic links with Franco’s Spain and a

²¹⁵ *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 2 April 1944, p.1; *New York Times*, 8 April 1944, p.15.

²¹⁶ *Sunday Herald*, 27 November 1949, p.51; *Sunday Herald*, 11 December 1949, p.39.

resumption of friendly relations with Germany and Japan. A range of other policies and ideas were discussed by the women present, collectively portraying a generally conservative group, politically engaged with matters local and national. One attendee requested group opposition to the forthcoming construction of a steel mill in neighbouring New London County on the grounds that “the government is going to build it and it will be the first step toward the nationalization of the entire steel industry.” Another proposed an investigation of Mansfield State Training School, a local mental health facility where “worse cruelties are perpetrated [...] than in any concentration camp in Europe”, a belief that prefigured the opposition to mental health legislation popular on the fringes of the grassroots conservative network in the mid-1950s.²¹⁷

Agreement was reached on a motion to oppose liberal Democratic governor Chester Bowles’ “[Americans for Democratic Action]-backed” attempts to reform the Connecticut school system. The fledgling Minute Women were equally unenthused with their senators: Republican Raymond Baldwin, who had recently resigned as senator to become a Connecticut supreme court justice, was denounced as a “traitor” while the name of his Democratic replacement, William Benton, was booed when mentioned. Disaffection with the mainstream political process was further demonstrated in the group’s choice of guest speaker — election analyst Roger Dunn of Greenwich. Dunn regaled the gathering with tales of liberal shenanigans — the “payroll” vote, whereby federal employees, out of deference to the party which created their jobs, accounted for eight million Democratic ballots — and Republican weakness. The GOP was a “suicide club”,

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*

he announced, whose failures would enable “the tentacles of the welfare state [to] go stronger and reach further” until the point it achieved: what, exactly?²¹⁸

Communism was not specifically on the agenda, at least not by name, but it was clearly on the minds of the future Minute Women, not least the member who called out that the welfare state might be more accurately termed “the police state”. Stevenson used her pulpit to advocate loyalty tests for schoolteachers, while a national schools’ campaigner, Lucille Crain, suspected subversion lurking within Governor Bowles’ education fact-finding committee. “I’ve seen one of your textbooks [...] It supports the welfare state,” she announced, before asking the Connecticut women to send her a list of social science texts used in their own town’s schools: “By social sciences, I mean history, geography, politics and this weird new thing called sociology.” Further discussion centred on Hester McCullough’s plight, with the attachment law again criticised and Stevenson declaring that, out of principle, the accused red-baiter should refuse to pay even a five cent bond to reclaim her “attached” property.²¹⁹

Awareness of the emerging national issue of un-American activities and subversive associations was further demonstrated by a lengthy discussion of the group’s name. After rejecting ideas such as the Constitution Savers, the Committee on Public Safety, Independent Women, and the Women’s Party, the choice came down to two equally problematic options: Women United and the Minute Women. An organization known as Women United had already been

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*

“proved to be subversive” by the FBI, it was alleged, while another attendee recalled a Minute Women group that had campaigned in favour of the leftist presidential candidate Henry Wallace in 1944. Stevenson solved the dilemma by declaring the group should call themselves the Minute Women (her favoured option), but make sure to register the new entity with HUAC as a “loyal” organization.²²⁰

The new moniker spoke to a key element of conservative thought: the glorification and idealization of the founding fathers and American independence. “We should be ready to serve at any minute,” argued a woman named Luella Klein. “Just as our ancestors did in the Revolution.” The original Minutemen were units within the colonial militias that fought during the American Revolutionary War, so-called because they had undergone specialized training with the goal of being able to be deployed “at a minute’s notice”. The terminology passed into popular use, with various groups adopting it for both purely inspirational reasons as well as “patriotic”, political ones. It can be argued that Revolutionary War iconography is an obvious reference point for any American advocacy group that aligns itself in opposition to what it perceives as the political mainstream: having the potential to represent any number of appealing characteristics, such as patriotism, democracy, anti-elitism and radicalism. Indeed, left-wing groups including the People’s Bicentennial Commission — an anti-corporate group that referenced and subverted the nationalism of the 1976 bicentennial celebrations — have adopted the trappings of the 1770s in order to contextualise their particular brand of anti-

²²⁰ *Sunday Herald*, 11 December 1949, p.39.

establishment politics. However, in general, it has been the right that has found most use for American independence symbolism.

In fact, the conservative claim to Revolutionary War rhetoric and ideals has been carefully established over a number of years. In her preference for the Minute Women name, Stevenson was presumably influenced by the Chamber of Commerce's *A Program for Community Anti-Communist Action*, which instructed readers "Communism will be met only if Americans in every community make this their personal job. It is your responsibility and duty. You are the Minute Men of today". Beyond the Connecticut Minute Women, numerous anticommunist groups would adopt the Jeffersonian motto "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty" as the moral imperative for their red-baiting activities. Amateur counter-subversives could keep up to date with the battle for America's Cold War soul via pamphlets like *Paul Revere Messages*. Organizations like the Liberty Belles and Constitution Party sprang up. For all that, say, Thomas Jefferson's atheism and Francophilia, or Thomas Paine's progressive tendency, would not sit comfortably within post-war US conservatism, the imagery of the War of Independence provided ample rhetorical currency for right-wing groups marching under the banners of personal liberty, nostalgia, religion and above all, patriotism. This "superpatriotism", as liberal commentators often derided it, had a corollary in a sort of American nationalism, often allied with racism and anti-Semitism, which had traction on the fringes of the grassroots anticommunist scene and occasionally bled over into more conventionally conservative spheres.²²¹

²²¹ Folder 80, Box 5, Right-Wing Pamphlets.

Nothing so vulgar was on display in New Haven that afternoon, but the *Herald's* reporter nevertheless found cause to suspect something stronger than common-or-garden conservatism was on the minds of some Minute Women. In an almost exclusively white gathering, Nancy Hendrick recalled hearing one woman comment that “[n]o one who looks as if her name might be Rosenberg” was in attendance. Another member saw the Minute Women as heirs to the legacy of the America First Committee — the 1940s anti-war group, seen by many liberals as a Nazi-front — advocating anti-Semitic America First-er Charles Lindbergh as an ideal “Christian” presidential candidate and his wife, Anne-Morrow, as a potential recruit. How representative these anecdotes were of the general sentiments expressed in New Haven is debatable — for all her detailed accounting, the tone of Hendrick’s early Minute Women reporting veered from good natured disdain to outright contempt. Any remaining suggestion of her status as a politically neutral observer was extinguished just one week after New Haven, with the publication of her editorial on the newly formed Connecticut group titled — instructively — “Those Minute Women”. Everyone had a right, she conceded, “to organize or join whatever political group he thinks [...] will accomplish whatever reform he happens to believe in,” but equally so did everyone have a right, a duty even, to investigate “whether the organization runs on actual knowledge or on misinformation, and, second, whether it is motivated by the desire for the greatest good or by intolerance and self interest.” It was a duty Hendrick felt keenly. Far from a being a non-partisan group, the Minute Women, she argued, were majority Republican — and “a bitter, disgruntled, misinformed Republicanism” at that. Opposition to the new steel mill was not only wrong, but wrongheaded — “If the ladies had bothered to read even a few

of the newspaper stories they would have realized it was a completely free enterprise affair” — while around the entire group, Hendrick insisted, swirled a strong current of bigotry and intolerance.²²²

The Minute Women response to Hendrick’s editorial was composed by Luella Klein, in suitably grandiose style. “We, the Minute Women in entering upon the great work before us are not unmindful that, in its prosecution, we may be called to test our sincerity, even as a fiery ordeal,” she wrote to the *Herald*. “We anticipate no small amount of misconception, misrepresentation and calumny.” So began a long correspondence between the Minute Women and the local media that served the areas in which the organization flourished. In the basic pledge that would be adopted by all future recruits, the instruction “Write letters” was the second of three commands, coming after “Keep informed” and before “Alert and inform others”.²²³

The Connecticut women’s next communiqué came not from a member, but the husband of their leader. On 15 February 1950, a letter from E.S. Stevenson was printed in the *Hartford Courant*, noting a reporter’s characterization of his wife as “Sizzling Suzanne Silvercruys Stevenson” and offering up a poetic response from the lady in question.

“Sizzling Suzie” is quite a name:

It’s one that I cannot spurn,

²²² *Sunday Herald*, 11 Dec 1949, p.44.

²²³ *Sunday Herald*, 1 January 1950, p.28.

I'm no hypocrite and I admit
That some things make me burn.

Like discrimination of race or creed
Or the color of someone's skin.
Like the handouts paid from dough we made.
To insure that votes pour in.²²⁴

Perhaps the Connecticut Minute Women's most dedicated letter writer was a Bristol divorcee named Grace Lee Kenyon; though she followed no party line and needed no prompting from the group's hierarchy to make her feelings known, as she had been contributing her particular brand of passionate, vitriolic conservatism to the letters page of the *Hartford Courant* for years before she found an ally in Stevenson and her organization. An August 1950 missive, in which she declared her status as a Minute Woman just as "several of [her] ancestors were Minute Men", is instructive in terms of its politics (right-wing, belligerent), its tone (melodramatic, caustically humorous), and the self-conception of its author. While the nominal aim of the letter is to criticize opponents of the atom bomb ("moronic specimens of the human race"), its greatest impact is in its characterization of Kenyon as a no-nonsense conservative housewife, driven at last to political outrage not just by events abroad but by liberal betrayal at home. Wishing for a visit from petition-bearing peace campaigners "at a time when I am in my present vile mood", Kenyon notes that such is her current low opinion of society "when the doorbell rings, I start

²²⁴ *Hartford Courant*, 15 February 1950, p.10.

rolling up my sleeves and reaching for the rolling pin". That Kenyon's background and letter-writing habits suggest she was far from the homely stereotype she evoked is secondary to the image's — consciously intended — effect: to frame partisan rhetoric as homespun wisdom.²²⁵

As the year progressed, the Minute Women of Connecticut set about ratifying their principles, developing their tactics and honing their unusual organizational structure. So-called "clusters" of twenty-five-to-thirty women met in towns across the state, each attendee being encouraged to seek out and organize their own cluster of local activists. Individual members were designated generals, colonels, majors and lieutenants — with all these "officers" instructed to recruit five new enlistees at the rank below their own. Alongside the military imagery, the Minute Women continued in their fondness for revolutionary-era references: Liberty Bell-shaped piggy banks were designed, with members expected to pay out "mad" and "glad" money each time they were infuriated or heartened by national political events. Proceeds went into the group's central fund.

Stevenson, meanwhile, continued in her role as the public face of the new organization, travelling to Ohio to give speeches expounding the Minute Women ideals. She designed the group's logo — a patriotic emblem featuring an interlocked blue M and red W surrounding a white eagle, with the slogan "Guarding the Land We Love" arcing above — and made plans for the shield to adorn pins, scarves and seals. The first state-wide Minute Women meeting was

²²⁵ *Hartford Courant*, 3 August 1950, p.8.

postponed, in anticipation of a much larger turn-out than could be accommodated at the event's 3,300-capacity venue.²²⁶



Image 16: Minute women logos; *Minute Women of the USA, Inc.*; Flickr.com.

Six months into their existence things seemed to be going well for the Minute Women. A steady drip-drip of publicity kept their name prominent in the local press: Stevenson's high profile ensured meetings and announcements were routinely reported. Information on the individual members who swelled the group's numbers in these early days is difficult to come by, but a general portrait of the higher-ranking figures suggests a group of middle-and-upper-middle-class women with the time, means and inclination to lead an active, politicized social life.

²²⁶ *Sunday Herald*, 19 February 1950, p.27; *Ibid*, 19 March 1950, p.27.

Before her brief Minute Women tenure (she died in April 1950), Ebba Evans Reardon, of Hartford's wealthy Farmington suburb, was the first president of the Farmington Valley Women's Republican Club, a member of the State Council of Republican women and a boardmember of the League of Women Voters. Her busy social life also included meetings of the Antiquarian and Landmarks Society, the Early American Industries Association, the Pewter Collectors Club of America, and the Rushlight Club (an association of collectors and students of historic lighting). She also found time to serve as a vice-president of the Avon Garden Club and a member of St. James Episcopal Church of Farmington.²²⁷

Of course, while the specific social circumstances of suburban and small town Connecticut in the 1950s undoubtedly expedited the growth of the Minute Women, it is not an explanation in itself for their popularity. Being white, privileged, female, and possessed of an inclination toward club membership did not automatically lead to signing up for Stevenson and Kellems' crusade to save America. As Brennan points out, "Most middle-class women did not join anticommunist clubs, write letters, give speeches or run for offices" — Minute Women and their peers were vastly outnumbered by those whose political activities tended toward to the mainstream, and, even more so, by those who were not politically active at all. Nevertheless, the post-war years were a time of increasing political involvement for Americans, particularly American women. Stouffer found that women, while less interested in domestic Cold War issues than men, were markedly more intolerant of leftist unorthodoxy — a gender

²²⁷ *Hartford Courant*, 24 April 1950, p.4.

divide that was largely consistent across the educational, economic and regional spectrum.²²⁸

What is clear is that the early leaders of the Minute Women were not — despite implications to the contrary from both themselves and their opponents — politically naïve. It is possible that there were many low ranking members who were genuinely awoken from ideological slumber by the perceived failure of the American political mainstream to deal with the twin, interlinked threats of foreign-inspired communism and weak-kneed domestic liberalism — indeed, the Minute Women set out specifically to create a plausible organizational framework by which this might happen. But Kellems, Stevenson, Reardon, Beach, Whithorne — those who set the group's agenda in the early days — were, to a woman, politically experienced conservative Republicans.

By mid-1950, the Minute Women advisory council had set down the group's core principles — and provided more evidence of political sophistication and specific conservative aims. Goal seven on the list — “To fight actively communism and socialism in every form” — spoke to the group's Cold War *raison d'être* and was a logical enough rallying cry for concerned citizens in these early McCarthyite days. Goal eight, meanwhile, offered a religious response to tumultuous times — “To pray for spiritual understanding, wisdom, and enlightenment to lead us on the way to permanent peace” — and evoked a general strain of social conservatism that would come to symbolize the grassroots right in the years

²²⁸ Brennan, *Mothers, Wives and the Red Menace*, p.152; Stouffer, *Communism, Conformity and Civil Liberties*, pp.133-139.

ahead. Elsewhere, though, the Minute Women principles called forth classic, anti-New Deal, fiscally conservative ideals — “economy in state and federal governments [...] a balanced budget, reduction of the national debt [...] the rebirth of free enterprise” — and oddly precise policy proposals, including one which would have certainly appealed to an outspoken industrialist like Vivien Kellems, but had seemingly less resonance for the archetypal suburban housewife: “the removal of war time emergency excises and all hidden taxes”.²²⁹

With chapters now in operation in a number of states — including particularly active branches in Maryland and Ohio — the Minute Women of Connecticut had become the Minute Women of the USA: a twenty-thousand-strong movement, according to its leadership, with ambitions to expand a hundred-fold within two years. Despite, or perhaps because of, the young group’s success, cracks in the united front were showing. Even as her “non-partisan” organization was attracting membership and publicity beyond its home state, Kellems was bidding to be Connecticut’s Republican nominee for the US Senate. Dorothy Beach, at a meeting of prominent party members in May, framed her friend’s candidacy as a feminist issue, claiming that “the women are getting the run-around” from local GOP leaders — notwithstanding, apparently, Kellems’ own fears that Clare Boothe Luce might once again swoop into the contest and snatch away her prize. The election bid, and Beach’s backing of it, threw the pair into conflict with Stevenson. Not only did the industrialist’s electoral ambitions nakedly flout the Minute Women’s supposed political impartiality, but her attempts to rally support among the membership irritated her co-founder greatly. In August, ten

²²⁹ *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 13 May 1950, p.12.

months after the Lyme gathering that brought the group to life, Kellems and Beach returned their Minute Women pins, thus formalizing their resignation. More departures were to follow.²³⁰

Ironically — given their vow to “fight actively communism and socialism in every form” and their leader’s frequent warnings of “zero hour” — it was not long before Minute Women found themselves subject to some mild red-baiting from within. Hester McCullough, whose willingness to call a spade a spade and anyone she did not like a red was well known, objected to a suspiciously un-American Minute Women advertising campaign opposing the Korean War. The conflict was a problematic issue for grassroots counter-subversives, whose rhetoric incorporated both support for decisive military intervention to halt the global expansion of communism as well as isolationist opposition to international cooperation, particularly via the hated United Nations. To McCullough, the slogan “Mothers, Save Our Country. Save Our Boys. No More Koreas” sounded too similar to the Communist party line. It was, she insisted, “a short-sighted appeal to mothers’ emotions,” and, moreover, she no longer felt “the Minute Women [were] following the ideals in which” she believed. The loss of McCullough’s dynamic presence, aside from being a personal blow (Stevenson had loyally attended all of her friend’s libel hearings), highlighted a tension within the group over the issue that was seen as their primary mission.²³¹

²³⁰ *Hartford Courant*, 21 April 1950, p.1; *Hartford Courant*, 22 May 1950, p.10; *Sunday Herald*, 4 February 1951, p.13.

²³¹ *Hartford Courant*, 31 October 1950, p.14.

With her fellow founders falling by the wayside, Stevenson redoubled her commitment to the cause, abandoning her artistic pursuits to work full time as the Minute Women's national chairman. A national headquarters was established in the village of Southport, Connecticut, a paid director employed and, from 1 December 1950, a monthly newspaper published. At the same time Stevenson kept her personal profile high by delivering speeches around the country — invariably on the topic “Guarding the Land We Love” — and orchestrating political stunts such as her battle with the Textile Workers Union of America in the eastern Connecticut town of Willimantic. She had been booked to debate Henry Kullas, the regional director of the CIO-affiliated TWUA, before an audience of workers at the American Thread Company, but her opponent pulled out of the event, accusing her of making “unreasonable” demands in the selection of a moderator. Kullas' stand proved a mistake: Stevenson simply chose to speak unopposed to the 400-person audience and, in her most eye-catching pronouncement, called the practice of unions making deductions from their members' pay in order to fund political donations “un-American”. The TWUA responded that the deduction — which had amounted to a total of one dollar per member over a number of weeks — had been approved by a majority vote among their membership and that any worker who wanted his contribution returned would be obliged — but the symbolic victory was Stevenson's. On the first day the refunds were issued she invited reporters along to the factory, where she greeted workers outside the union office and announced “I am proud and happy that the courage and independence of the American worker is still alive”. By the end of the refund period, less than a third of the Willimantic union members had claimed their dollar back; no matter, the Minute Women national

chairman had gained significant media coverage — including a front page and a page two story in Connecticut’s largest daily newspaper — for her stand against “un-American” trade unionism.²³²

Anticommunism was firmly on the national agenda by mid-1951 and, with President Truman’s dismissal of General Douglas MacArthur, grassroots activists had a new hero. The Maryland branch of the Minute Women were so moved by the injustice brought down upon the outspoken military chief that they broke one of Stevenson’s cardinal rules and planned a march on Washington in support of MacArthur’s anticipated presidential campaign. The Minute Women, it was repeatedly made clear in speeches and in the group’s newsletters, was not a pressure group but an educational organization. They did not stand as a group on any platform, but merely provided their membership with information on key national and local affairs: what members did with that information was a matter of individual conscience. Of course, in reality, loyal Minute Women had a very clear idea of how they were supposed to act in response to issues raised in their newsletters, reading lists, meetings and speeches. Though the group insisted, in a rebuttal of *Houston Post* journalist Ralph O’Leary’s exposé on the group’s involvement in the dismissal of school superintendent George Ebey, “Minute Women are never instructed to do anything”, a glance at any newsletter reveals “instructed” to require a rather technical definition. For instance, a 19 June 1954 bulletin from the Los Angeles-based California chapter covers various topics of interest — a Scarsdale, New York, school performance of the ballad opera “The Lonesome Train” written by blacklisted screenwriter Millard Lampell, the Army-

²³² *Hartford Courant*, 9 October 1950, p.18; *Ibid*, 16 October 1950, p.1; *Ibid*, 22 October 1950, p.2.

McCarthy hearings, the fluoridation of the water system — and concludes with a bullet-pointed list of “what you can do”, complete with names and addresses of the appropriate politician, newspaper editor or other public figure to whom the reader might best voice their concerns. Not only were the Minute Women’s suggestions of suitable actions an effective way of galvanizing support — particularly when buttressed by an efficient telephone tree system — they also represented a sophisticated manipulation of the medium. Newspaper editors or congressmen receiving repeated entreaties from the same organization would soon dismiss such an obviously orchestrated campaign, but it was a different matter when faced with dozens of personally signed, individually composed missives on a given subject. In this manner, the Minute Women’s influence and renown grew, often out of proportion to a group’s actual membership.²³³

While the foot soldiers of the organization toiled at their writing desks and telephones, the chairman of the Minute Women spent much of the next two years travelling the country visiting new chapters and giving speeches. Indicating the resources now at her disposal, a private plane took her on a mid-summer trip around Texas to visit Dallas, Houston, Fort Worth, San Antonio and Wichita Falls, along with numerous smaller conurbations. In April 1951, controversial speaker Joseph Kamp was invited to address the Connecticut Minute Women. While his ferocious red-baiting anti-unionism placed him within the bounds of acceptably mainstream conservatism, Kamp’s reported associations with Gerald Smith and other “extremists” crossed a line for many in the liberal and centrist media — the

²³³ “Minute Women of the USA, Inc., Stand on the Documented Truth”, Folder 117, Box 7, Right-Wing Pamphlets; *California State Bulletin of the Minute Women of the USA, Inc.*, 15 June 1954, in *Ibid.*

Sunday Herald described him as “one of the most notorious hate-mongers and anti-Semites in the United States”.²³⁴

Assessing the extent to which the politics of the Minute Women crossed over from traditional conservatism into racist, “far right” territory is a complicated calculation. On one hand — as the Kamp associations imply — the grassroots anticommunist world was one in which some racists and anti-Semites felt at home. On the other hand, there was no shortage of anticommunists willing to explicitly embrace racism and, aside from occasional allusions to things like “States’ rights”, the Minute Women resisted any temptation to go down that road. Whatever the truth, the accusation of bigotry was frequently — somewhat indiscriminately — levelled by the Minute Women’s critics: for all that anticommunists would happily identify any shade of left-of-centre thought with the worst excesses of Stalinism, the liberal media was often similarly quick to call a conservative a Nazi.

Mental health was also a sensitive subject for women anticommunists: the idea of Cold War “hysteria” is not a retrospective application and 1950s liberals were quick to dismiss female right-wingers as intellectually defective, often in gendered terms. The women themselves were aware of these insinuations and sometimes sought to acknowledge them ironically. When California’s Keep America Committee sent out a pamphlet urging readers to patriotically display Old Glory during a “voluntary flag week” in October 1950, they headlined it “To Arms Women ‘Crackpots’ — Fly Your Colors”. By way of explanation, the mailing

²³⁴ *Sunday Herald*, 22 April 1951, p.11.

offered a series of definitions by which women might know if they qualified for this “crackpot brigade”: “If you revere the Stars and Stripes as the symbol of your great Christian heritage [...] you are a crackpot [...] If you believe in opposing Socialism, Fabianism and Communism [...] you are a dangerous crackpot.”²³⁵

By 1955, however, the supposedly kooky nature of grassroots anticommunism was no laughing matter, at least for the Minute Women. “‘They’ are making plans for YOU,” began the California chapter’s 15 March newsletter. “You are going to have your brain ‘washed’ so you can become a well regulated little citizen of the world.” The missive noted how “super patriots” like the Minute Women had often been tarred with the stigma of mental illness — citing an American Friends Service Committee pamphlet that called opposition to the UN and UNESCO “paranoid delusion” as evidence — then informed readers that a “remedy for [their] condition” loomed in the form of the Community Mental Health Services Act. The proposers of this legislation, the Minute Women argued, were aiming to “sell the great body of Americans on the idea that at least 25% of their neighbors are suffering ‘delusions’ and mental illnesses of some sort”. To illustrate the nefarious potential uses of the sweeping powers the act supposedly provided, the newsletter explained that the principal backer — the National Association of Mental Health — included in its affiliates the Southern California Society for Mental Hygiene. This group, among its many other crimes, sold to its membership literature produced by the Public Affairs Committee — an infamous organization of pamphleteers whose offerings included the dangerously internationalist “The Races of Mankind” and the frankly degenerate “The Facts of

²³⁵ “To Arms Women “Crackpots” — Fly Your Colors”, Folder 140, Box 7, Right-Wing Pamphlets.

Life for Children” (sample passage, double underlined for effect: “Many parents still suggest that the really meaningful aspects of life and love are mental or spiritual and that the physical element is a kind of afterthought, necessary, perhaps, but not very. This just isn’t true”). By this somewhat convoluted series of steps, the Minute Women illustrated to its members that their very freedom was at risk from the new legislation: “It should be clear that any deviation from the accepted ‘norm’ might bring the ‘men in the white coats’ to your door!”²³⁶

The anticommunist community’s concern with the totalitarian possibilities of mental health care seems to have its roots in a 1948 International Conference of Mental Health in London, the theme of which was “Mental Health and World Citizenship”. The conference’s somewhat bold aim of applying psychiatric and psychological study to the “problems of group attitudes and world affairs” sounded dubiously utopian to patriotic conservatives. Worse, attempts by writers like the social psychologist Harry Overstreet to specifically use the new field of mental health to understand what they saw as the “problems” of prejudice and reactionary tendencies around the world left right-wingers feeling particularly targeted. “In some people the areas of rigidity are so numerous and contiguous that we can only speak of these individuals as a prejudiced person,” wrote Overstreet in 1952. “Try as we may, we can scarcely open up a subject that does not tap their permeative, automatic ‘againstness’. Such people may appear ‘normal’ in the sense that they are able to hold a job and otherwise maintain their status as members of society; but they are, we now recognize, well along

²³⁶ *California State Bulletin of the Minute Women of the USA, Inc.*, 15 March 1955, in Folder 5, Box 40, *Counterattack* Files.

the road to mental illness.” When the DAR reproduced these words in a mail out, they simply underlined “prejudiced persons” and “well along the road to mental illness”. No further comment was needed.²³⁷

The links between mental health theory, pro-communist, pro-world government intrigue, and a specific campaign against conservatism gained prominence in the literature of the Minute Women and a new California-based group called the American Public Relations Forum. The Minute Women’s 1955 stance against the Community Mental Health Services Act was echoed by the APRF — whose founder Stephanie Williams spoke against the legislation before a Senate committee and whose efforts were credited with defeating the proposal — and provided a template for a broader defence against the dangers posed by the following year’s Alaska Mental Health Bill. A repudiation of what Michelle Nickerson describes as a “seemingly innocuous piece of legislation” was written by Orange County mother Gene Birkeland and printed in the conservative local newspaper the *Santa Ana Register* under the imposing headline — “Now— Siberia U.S.A.” The bill, which provided funds and land for Alaska to construct its own psychiatric facilities, was understood by Birkeland to be “establishing our own version of the Siberian slave camps” and provoked “swift direct action” by the Minute Women and the APRF, both of which counted the author among their members.²³⁸

²³⁷ *British Medical Journal*, 22 November 1947, p.837; “The Mentally Ill - This Could Mean You”, leaflet in Folder 5, Box 40, *Counterattack* Files.

²³⁸ Michelle Nickerson, “The Lunatic Fringe Strikes Back: Conservative Opposition to the Alaska Mental Health Bill of 1956”, in Robert D. Johnston ed., *The Politics of Healing: Histories of Alternative Medicine in Twentieth-Century North America* (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp.117-130.

The “Siberia USA” controversy proved compelling for the grassroots anticommunism community. Birkeland’s ideas were embraced by dozens of organizations and pamphleteers across the country, and what had seemed likely to be a most straightforward passage of legislation had to struggle into law through a bombardment of protest mail and a long line of activists eager to testify before Congress. More importantly, the idea of mental health care as a liberal conspiracy to disenfranchise and incarcerate right-wingers — a theory that was only truly implausible on grounds of practicality, not will — took hold across the anticommunist network. An anonymous leaflet revealed the plight of a Mrs Jean Harris, “held prisoner in a New York hospital” after she exposed the secret use of a device that could pick up the “brain action” of anyone in the world. Neo-Nazi publication *Common Sense* devoted a front-page splash to the story of Lucille Miller. The wide-ranging response to mental health fears also illustrates the growing interaction and ideological cross-pollination between the Minute Women and their numerous imitators and co-polemicists — both older groups who had metamorphosed into dogmatically anticommunist organizations, and new groups modelled on Suzanne Silvercruys Stevenson’s all-woman, grassroots prototype.²³⁹

In California, for example, the Minute Women’s growing popularity was rivalled by that of a new anticommunist group with a familiar programme and an even more familiar figurehead. Vivien Kellems’ national prominence had again failed to translate into Connecticut Republican establishment approval when, following

²³⁹ “Why Was Mrs Harris Held Prisoner?”, leaflet in Folder 219, Box 13, Right-Wing Pamphlets; *Common Sense*, 15 June 1955, p.1; *Park City Daily News*, 29 December 1955, p.4.

her resignation from the Minute Women, she lost the 1950 Senate nomination — but in Orange County, California, she found a receptive audience for her anti-tax stance, red-baiting rhetoric and homespun, gender-based conservatism. Only a few months after splitting from one Revolutionary War-referencing, conservative, anticommunist women's group, the industrialist unveiled a Revolutionary War-referencing, conservative, anticommunist women's group of her own: The Liberty Belles.

Kellems introduced her new organization at an October 1951 meeting of the Los Angeles County Federation of Women's Clubs — a body that had recently broken from its national parent organization over the promotion of supposed "world federalism" — in Huntington, Orange County. The Liberty Belles, the founder explained, were "pledged to [the] eradication of Socialism, Communism and corruption; to revision and reduction of all taxes and government spending; to the return to Congress of the right to declare war so that never again on the whim of a President can American boys be sent to foreign lands to be shot." The conflict in Korea could be stopped immediately, she argued, via the destructive power of the atomic bomb, or at least the threat of such. A lofty southern California enrolment target of one hundred thousand women was proposed in order to help enact these goals, and former Los Angeles FWC president Mrs George Turecheck was appointed the chairman in charge of this massive recruitment.²⁴⁰

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 2 October 1951, p.B1.

A few days later the Liberty Belles made their second public appearance, and received their second prominent write-up in the *Los Angeles Times*. This time, Kellems introduced her new group to the Los Angeles unit of Pro America — formerly the National Organization of Republican Women — who had already taken an active role in grassroots anticommunism, particularly during the Pasadena schools crisis of 1950. Kellems, along with her co-speaker Corinne Griffith (the celebrated silent movie actress turned author and real estate magnate), advocated a woman's crusade to unseat President Truman. "If we can pin 10,000,000 Liberty Bells on the women of the United States, persuading them to go to the polls for a straight American vote in '52, we shall have cashed in on the fact that women are thinking straight for the first time in 20 years," she said.²⁴¹

Kellems spoke in generalities, but weaved a rhetorical web that combined the perceived disasters of American policy, the threat of homegrown subversion and her old bugbear taxes into a hyperbolic, existentially fearful whole. "We are tired [...] of not being able to buy the right food for our families, of having everything in the world taxed until we can neither buy or own the things we want and need," she said. "We are tired of having our country honey-combed by traitors and spies. If we don't put a stop to this in 1952 I am ready to think we shall go forward into a greater and complete dictatorship." She also lamented the loss of "States' rights" — a possible dog whistle toward pro-segregationists in her audience — as the "first great step toward Communism." Corinne Griffith echoed Kellems' stance on the evils of "Marxist" income tax and offered up her own

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 5 October 1951, p.B1.

version of the Minute Women's grassroots organizational techniques: "sort of on the chain letter plan — each of you taking five as your quota and each of them working with five others. Think of the number of voters we could educate if each of us were to do that with seriousness". *Los Angeles Times* reporter Bess Wilson took down Griffith and Kellems' words extensively and uncritically, and paid vivid testament to the appeal of the incipient association to Orange County women. "The fact that the overflow crowd was unable to procure luncheon tickets and yet remained for a meeting of more than three hours attested both to the popularity of the speakers and to the interest of women in the subjects on which they spoke," she wrote.²⁴²

If the Minute Women's early days were marked by a determination to appear as apolitical "educators", even if its leaders' personal history suggested otherwise, the Liberty Belles' commitment to neutrality did not even extend as far as paying lip service. "There isn't room in this country today for a non-political organization, or a non-political person," Kellems told a meeting of the Los Angeles Breakfast Club one November morning. "We still have one weapon left, you know. It's the ballot. If we don't use it in 1952, I'm afraid we won't have it much longer". The industrialist's lack of predictive abilities when it came the impending demise of democracy stood in stark contrast to her gift for dramatic phraseology. The next day she told a group of 275 investment professionals — members of the Bond Club — that America stood as Germany in 1939, on the

²⁴² *Ibid.*

verge of either economic collapse or war. “You [businessmen] can’t do anything about it [b]ut we women can,” she said. “We’re going to dig you out of this!”²⁴³

By the spring of 1952, the Liberty Belles were claiming a membership of thirty thousand. Letter writing campaigns included isolationist opposition to the Universal Military Training and Service Act of 1951 and the United Nations General Assembly resolution against genocide, as well as more general resistance to taxes and expenditure. Their leader, meanwhile, once more set about fulfilling her personal political goals, finally making it onto the ballot back home in Connecticut as the Independent Republican candidate for Senate. During the campaign she derided the state GOP hierarchy as Hitler-esque in its supposed silencing of Taft supporters during the presidential primaries and complained of an apparent “foul attempt to remove [her] name from the ballot” over an allegedly large number of irregularities in her nominating petition. If party bigwigs were indeed conspiring out of fear of this conservative challenger, they need not have worried: Kellems remained in the race but finished a distant third place behind Democrat incumbent William Benton and victorious Republican challenger William Purtell, polling a mere twenty-one thousand votes.²⁴⁴

It was electorally as good as it got for Kellems. In 1954 she failed to secure enough signatures to make the Connecticut governor’s ballot; two years later, not only did she lose out in a — by this stage unlikely — attempt for the official

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 15 November 1951, p.A1; *Ibid.*, 20 May 1952, p.9; *Ibid.*, 16 November 1951, p.2.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 8 March 1952, p.A1; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 4 June 1952, p.14; *Ibid.*, 25 September 1952, p.11; *Ibid.*, 8 November 1952, p.2.

Republican senate nomination, but her previous Independent Republican backers added insult to injury by endorsing her old friend turned adversary Suzanne Silvercruys Stevenson for the seat. Kellems once more set about gathering enough signatures to gain ballot paper space under her own name — conducting a “vigorous campaign” of cut-out-and-sign newspaper ads — but had more than half her submitted endorsements struck off as forgeries by a handwriting expert retained by the Secretary of State. Once approvingly described as “Vivien the Great [...] [b]arnstorming the [s]tate”, newspapers now referred to her, somewhat wearily, as “a storm center” in Connecticut politics. Reduced to write-in status, Kellems could not even defeat Jasper McLevy — the socialist mayor of Bridgeport — picking up 6,219 votes to the left winger’s 7,079. Stevenson’s Independent Republican endorsement proved a pyrrhic victory. She managed just 10,190 votes, compared to official GOP candidate Prescott Bush’s winning tally of 610,000.²⁴⁵

For all their media coverage and bold claims of mass membership, the women-led anticommunist groups of the early fifties held little sway with the general population. When, at the third attempt, Vivien Kellems made it on to a ballot in a general election, her polling suggested she belonged on the eccentric fringes of American politics rather than on newspaper front pages with those establishment Democrats and Republicans she so floridly skewered as un-American enemies of democracy. It would be unfair to judge the popularity of the Liberty Belles, Minute Women or the wider movement of female domestic Cold

²⁴⁵ *Hartford Courant*, 22 May 1950, p.10; *New York Times*, 2 October 1956; *Statistics of the Presidential and Congressional Election of November 6, 1956* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1958), p.6.

Warriors solely on the basis of Kellems and Stevenson's ill-fated political campaigns. Nevertheless, throughout their period of prominence from 1948 to around 1956, conservative, anticommunist housewives conspicuously failed to become the rejuvenating force the Minute Women and their imitators promised, nor the reactionary threat their enemies feared.

Yet if their potency as a mass movement was dramatically overblown by both sympathetic and adverse media coverage, the process by which the anticommunist women invited and exploited this public spotlight is instructive. They used and subverted gendered discourse to portray themselves as plucky, homespun ladies brightly exhorting their fellow housewives to engage civically and politically, rather than as the partisan, right-wing ideologues they more accurately were. And, of course, for all the illusory hyperbole, significant numbers did rush to sign up to guard the land they loved from imminent destruction, at a time when, if contemporary scholarly wisdom was to be believed, a prosperous, post-ideological consensus reigned. The established general interest groups who shared many of the Minute Women's anticommunist views — the Sons and Daughters of the American Revolution, the major veterans' organizations and their auxiliaries — may have boasted higher memberships, but it is likely a great number of these had relatively little interest in counter-subversion or world government conspiracy theories. In the network of cranks, intellectuals, rabble-rousers and lobbyists who attempted to bring McCarthyism into the homes of America, it was women's organizations who were best able to galvanize ordinary Americans to lobby their congressmen, write their local newspaper and put counter-subversive ideas into practice.

Who were these women, and what did their decision to sign up for an anticommunist crusade — in their tens, if not hundreds, of thousands — actually mean? Not the “bat-haunted” old ladies of Richard Rovere’s imagination: though they certainly tended towards middle-age, their often conspiracist worldview overlapped with the ideas of a wide cross-section of the conservative media, from the columnists of the Hearst press to popular rabble-rousing radio broadcasters. It is difficult to judge to what extent the Minute Women and others’ more outré pronouncements were motivated by hysterical resentment (as their detractors suggested), genuine concern or a sense of political expediency. What is certain is that the idea of these grassroots McCarthyists as one-note red baiters is way off the mark. The literature and campaigning interests of the women-led anticommunist groups formed a patchwork of patriotism, prejudice, retrenchment and reaction, all synthesized into an existential fear that saw America as drastically susceptible to an ongoing and utterly unwelcome descent into an alien form of society — be it communism, world federalism or just modern liberal democracy. Some of these ideas were shared with unashamedly fascistic blocs, but the Minute Women and their allies were not the would-be totalitarians portrayed by contemporary liberals. Their conservatism encompassed entirely coherent self-interest for a group of older, wealthier American women at the mid-point of the twentieth century: opposition to taxes; resistance to a modern, progressive view of society that saw their more reactionary tendencies as wrongheaded to the point of mental illness; a religiously-informed concept of Americanism in marked contrast to the more humanist, internationalist outlook embraced by post-war liberals. Yet at the

same time it incorporated many viewpoints that do not seem compatible with the everyday concerns of housewives from the upper-middle-class suburbs of New York and Los Angeles: or at least, it stretched more concrete, materialist aims to an ephemeral, hyper-ideological extreme.

It must also be said that the women anticommunists were consistently wrong on many of their positions. Despite clearly failing to heed the Minute Women's call to oust Democrats and moderate Republicans from government, repeal income tax and so on, America did not slide into economic meltdown, nor have its sovereignty subsumed by a new UN-led world order. It is hard to believe that women as worldly and undoubtedly intelligent as Kellems or Stevenson could genuinely have been convinced that totalitarian, socialistic world government was only days away, or that a local librarian who found the notion of global democracy and citizenry harmless enough was of comparable security threat to a Soviet agent in a government department. It follows, therefore, that there may have been a degree of manipulation of anticommunist fervour toward more practical ends: an attempt to frame an era of prosperity and Republican ascendancy as one in which conservatives were the put-upon victims, in which weak left-wing factions were not only a real force but a treacherous and inherently un-American one.

Unlike their more celebrated grassroots counterparts in the 1960s, the women anticommunists of the early Cold War were kept at arms length by the Republican hierarchy, both nationally and in their home states. Yet, in some important ways, they prefigured later conservative trends just as significantly as

those Lisa McGirr called “suburban warriors”. Not as moralistic social conservatives — despite the frequently religious bent to their rhetoric — but certainly in their anti-government, anti-tax, anti-internationalist ideas, some of which have found new voice in the latest incarnation of grassroots GOP-but-not-quite-GOP conservative protest, the Tea Party movement. Most significantly, perhaps, the Minute Women, the Liberty Belles and others found a way to bring ideological, highly political, anti-liberal conservatism firmly into a community setting; whether it be through newsletters that could be read over the breakfast table, petitions that could be signed to combat local subversives or speeches that introduced global conspiracy theories and vivid denunciations of the political establishment into the benign world of civic clubs and women’s federations. This was never achieved more forcefully than in the field of education.

Chapter Five

Book Burners and One-Worlders:

The Grassroots Battle for America's Schools

The book burning that took place in Sapulpa, Oklahoma, in February 1952 might not have stacked up alongside the mass libricide committed by the Nazis in Germany twenty years previously — the five or six condemned titles amounted to enlightenment values lightly singed rather than consigned to the flames — but few concerned with the incident, on either side, were unaware of the symbolism. It was not to be the small, rural town's only brush with political notoriety but at the time it marked a rare appearance in the pages of the *New York Times* for a community of thirteen thousand. No one at the *Times* knew why the particular texts were considered so unsuitable for inclusion on high school library shelves, only that “they just weren't good reading for teen-age children”, but the act alone was enough to provoke dismay at the prospect of “totalitarian methods” at work in America. The unnamed censors, meanwhile, were acting in accordance with a tradition that sought to protect the content of library books, and by extension, the content of children's minds, from an equally vivid vision of totalitarianism.²⁴⁶

In the domestic Cold War, education was embraced as a vital front by both those who feared the American way of life was being undermined by communists, and those who believed the danger came from McCarthyist vigilantes. For anticommunists, the threat was in books that promoted not only left-wing ideals

²⁴⁶ *New York Times*, 13 February 1952; A second minor scandal for Sapulpa occurred in November 2008 when, on the morning after Barack Obama's historic presidential election win, the local newspaper chose only to note that the victor's Republican opponents, John McCain and Sarah Palin, had handsomely carried Oklahoma.

but also moral degeneracy and one-world government; teachers who indoctrinated students with un-American ideas; schools superintendents who advocated “progressive” curricula that valued the expansion of young minds over the provision of sound, practical instruction. For liberals, the menace arrived via a coordinated attack on the entire public education system, one that extended from the hounding of librarian Mary Knowles in the tiny township of Plymouth Meeting to the ousting of college professors from some of the country’s finest institutions; from the censorship of individual high school textbooks to attempts to overhaul entire cities’ school systems on ideological grounds.

Matthew Josephson, writing in the *Nation* in June 1952, listed those “bizarre folkways” which, he believed, were contrasted with American “pretensions to be the saviors of Western civilization” by European allies and eastern opponents alike: “Our political trials, our inquisitions of Hollywood movie actors, our American Legionnaires attacking schools and libraries, our mass hysteria over internal Communist enemies”. Josephson was not alone among critics of what he saw as the strange phenomenon of McCarthyism in ranking the assaults on American education by amateur anticommunists as of equal significance to those on the political and cultural elite. Liberal and left-leaning magazines of the early 1950s were filled with headlines like “The Books They Won’t Let You Read”, “The Dangers of Cultural Vigilantism” and “The Public Schools Retreat from Freedom”. Conservative publications, meanwhile, offered equally urgent articles, only this time under headings such as “The Commies Go After the Kids”, “The Propaganda Program of Our Academic Hucksters” and “Why You Buy Books that Sell Communism”. Across the political spectrum, a framework was established in

which normal, American educational values were being subverted by radical ideology — only the identity of the victims and perpetrators of this subversion were switched.²⁴⁷

There was nothing particularly new about any of this, even if the Cold War backdrop added a fresh frisson to traditional conservative-liberal educational battles. Political journalist Walter Lippmann's 1928 text *American Inquisitors* examined both the Dayton, Tennessee, trial of a young teacher who defied the state's prohibition on teaching schoolchildren about evolution (the infamous Scopes Monkey Trial) and Chicago Mayor William "Big Bill" Thompson's campaign against the teaching of supposedly unpatriotic "New History" (in which he vowed to "never rest until the histories in use in the Chicago public schools are purged of their pro-British propaganda"). These local campaigns, Lippman argued, were examples of "the bitterest political struggles which now divide the nations".²⁴⁸

After the McCarthy era, too, schools struggles continued, often under the guise of the "culture wars" fought by the evangelical Christians and their politically conservative allies among the New Right. Supreme Court decisions such as the 1962 ruling against prayer in public schools became, Lisa McGirr contends, important rallying points for grassroots right-wingers: symbols of a secular, federal establishment fundamentally at odds with traditional moral values. In 1969 Orange County activists fought to expunge a popular sex education

²⁴⁷ *The Nation*, 28 June 1952, p.619.

²⁴⁸ Walter Lippman, *American Inquisitors* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1993), p.22.

programme from the Anaheim school curriculum. Not only did they succeed in slashing the scope and availability of the specific course, but the furore prompted the passage of a new local law requiring parental permission for children to attend such classes and allowing for pre-approval of future curriculums.²⁴⁹

On one level, the enduring nature of these education battles is not surprising. As Lippman argued in 1928, they spoke to a fundamental truth of pluralistic nations: “Wherever two or more groups within a state differ in religion, or in language and in nationality, the immediate concern of each group is to use the schools to preserve its own faith and tradition. For it is in the school that the child is drawn towards or drawn away from the religion and patriotism of its parents” (he might equally have cited cultural values or political partisanship). Those hoping to challenge the status quo frequently focus their attention on classrooms because childhood learning functions so effectively to bolster it. In America, with its unusually potent national narrative, this is particularly true. Establishment liberals and conservatives have jealously guarded a societal myth that, even today, inspires large majorities to buy into the meritocratic dream of individual responsibility and limitless economic potential. Indeed, Jonathan Zimmerman argues in *Whose America?* that while history study in schools may once have fostered societal inequality by excluding minorities from its idealized story of American progress, liberal efforts toward greater inclusivity have consciously rejected the idea of challenging the core patriotic sentiments. “Although texts have added welcome material about formerly neglected

²⁴⁹ McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, p.230.

Americans, they have retained their mawkish and triumphal tone about 'America' itself," he notes.²⁵⁰

If the grassroots conservative struggle to rid early 1950s classrooms of communist teachers and subversive textbooks can be understood as part of a continuum, a long running war in which specifically classroom related issues formed the pretext for a wider struggle over the nature and future shape of American society, what of its place within the McCarthyist context? A good deal has been written about the impact of educational anticommunism on its victims: Ellen Schrecker devoted an entire text, *No Ivory Tower*, to the red scare in America's universities. Scholarship on the activists behind the campaigns — particularly at the more community-based level of elementary and high school — is thinner on the ground. David Cate, in his *The Great Fear*, documents the political assault on New York's substantial roster of teachers with radical backgrounds — but understands it primarily as a "showdown" between the city's Board of Education and the left-wing Teacher's Union. In establishing the institutional forces that propelled the eventual dismissal of 321 New York school instructors during the McCarthy years, Cate gives little credence to any grassroots organizing that may or may not have bolstered the purges. He does acknowledge that "specific social and religious forces" legitimized and encouraged the Board of Education's anticommunist activities — the Brooklyn *Tablet*, for instance, which "articulated the anti-Marxist traditions of the [Catholic] Church, and more particularly its Irish wing, in the crude, rabble-

²⁵⁰ Lippmann, *American Inquisitors*, pp.22-23, quoted in Jonathan Zimmerman, *Whose America?: Culture Wars in the Public Schools* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), p.1; Zimmerman, *Whose America*, pp.6-9.

rousing phraseology of Coughlinite fascism” — but does not go further than generalizations in terms of the New York public’s response to the crisis.²⁵¹

Contemporaneously, Benjamin Fine’s front page *New York Times* report of 25 May 1952 attempted to articulate the nature of the struggle then taking place in America’s high schools and libraries. Investigations of a community’s education system in the name of counter-subversion could be instigated by patriotic societies, “professional” red baiting organizations or concerned individuals, he argued, but individual intrigues were part of a wider campaign. In his analysis of this phenomenon, Fine listed five major findings: That there was a “concerted” effort to censor textbooks and other academic literature; that voluntary groups were being created in nearly every state to screen books for un-American content; that librarians were the victims of intimidation; that the efforts of these educational red hunters had already resulted in an effective “blacklist” of certain texts; and that, finally, the figurative, occasionally literal, “book burning” was merely a component in a larger movement that was fundamentally opposed to the notion of public schools.²⁵²

As for the participants in this campaign, in the same article Public Education Association director Hubert Armstrong classified them three ways. First there were citizen “super-patriots”, imagined by Armstrong as essentially benign and well-meaning but easily provoked to outrage at supposed intrigue. The second, less relevant to this study, were racial or religious interest groups on the look out

²⁵¹ Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower*; Cauter, *The Great Fear*, pp.431-445.

²⁵² *New York Times*, 25 May 1952, p.1.

for specific slights. The third, he argued, were “full-time complainers” such as Allen Zoll and Lucille Crain (guest speaker at the inaugural Minute Women gathering), profit-driven activists who provided fuel and direction for the superpatriots’ fire. The extent of, and motivation behind, the interaction between groups one and three of Armstrong’s classification is a question central to the entire study of Cold War grassroots anticommunism.²⁵³

Crain, editor of the *Educational Reviewer* (an invaluable source for schools counter-subversives), responded to Fine and Armstrong’s concerns in a letter to the *Times* a few days later. “Other educators are welcoming the aid of alert and informed citizens who are increasingly aware of a prevailing left-wing philosophy in teaching materials used by their children,” she wrote. The *Educational Reviewer*, far from being an advocate of censorship, merely fulfilled a similar function to the book review pages of the *New York Times* — critiquing and commending texts as warranted, with no interest in how the reader chose to use the information provided. Publications like Crain’s were indeed a key weapon in the grassroots anticommunist arsenal but to dismiss them as a cynical attempt to exploit easily provoked “super-patriots” ignores the very real appetite for community involvement in the education debates of the late 1940s and 1950s.²⁵⁴

On one level, schools were — like the rest of public life — a potential venue for communist infiltration, and a particularly emotive one at that. Concern over what

²⁵³ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 2 June 1952, p.20.

damage Soviet agents might wreak in America's classrooms was exemplified by works such as "Permit Communist-Conspirators to be Teachers?" — submitted to the *Congressional Record* by Illinois congressman Fred Busbey in March 1953. This study concluded, not unsurprisingly, that because communism was a conspiracy rather than a "bona fide political party", and that its members were pledged to commit treason, "the only acceptable answer" to the question of communists in schools was an "automatic and absolute bar". The belief that the Kremlin was orchestrating a campaign of teacher-pupil indoctrination in American classrooms required a somewhat long view of the Cold War — subversive elementary school children presumably would provide less immediate benefits to the Soviet cause than, say, nuclear scientists — but the issue of card-carrying educators was at least a fairly straightforward one. Communist teachers were usually dispatched discreetly — "eased out of a job quietly, with no publicity, no fuss", as Ellen Schrecker describes the fate of her own sixth grade instructor. Purges were orchestrated by the various state and congressional investigating committees — or, in the case of the 321 unfortunate New York instructors, by a politically motivated and tactically minded schools superintendent — with no need for encouragement from the local community and little opposition from liberals for whom classroom communists were largely beyond the pale.²⁵⁵

Perhaps the most widely reported of the overtly anticommunist, community-inspired "witch-hunts" in education took place in the affluent town of Plymouth

²⁵⁵ "Permit Communist-Conspirators to be Teachers?" 83rd Congress, 1st Session, House Document No. 213, Box 48, Radical Right; Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes*, p.xi; As noted previously, only around five per cent of Americans believed in 1954 that a communist school teacher should be allowed to keep his or her job.

Meeting, on the outskirts of Philadelphia, where Mrs Philip Corson of a group called Alerted Americans mobilized support for the firing of a local librarian. Mary Knowles had been dismissed from a previous post in Norwood, Massachusetts after the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee subpoenaed her — it was claimed by high profile FBI informant Herbert Philbrick that she had been a member of the CP in 1947. When the Quakers who operated the William Jeanes Memorial Library offered Knowles a job, the town's anticommunist community sprang into action. Corson's "Citizens for Philbrick" campaign distributed flyers, organized for "reformed communist" Dr Bella Dodd to speak at the local PTA on the subject of "how to fight communism at home", and delivered a petition signed by 243 "patriotic Americans" to the Quakers. It demanded Mrs Knowles be run out of town and replaced with someone of "unquestioned loyalty". That Mary Knowles worked in a tiny library in a small township, that she had never admitted to CP membership, much less been accused of any specific acts of subversion, was of no consequence. "Librarians can [...] surreptitiously 'Corrupt our Youth'", argued the Alerted Americans. "[Ninety-nine] out of 100 who claim the fifth Amendment [as had Knowles] are communists". Moreover, the very fact of Knowles' now controversial status was threatening the "peace and harmony" of the Plymouth Meeting community, with "long-time friendships [...] being strained and shattered as neighbors fight each other over her rights and beliefs". Most instructively, Corson's Citizens for Philbrick material argued that, more than simply ridding the town of a dangerous outsider, taking part in the campaign to fire the local librarian was a chance for community members to assert their own patriotism and define themselves against those who might brook compromise when dealing with the

left-wing menace. Quoting an unnamed federal judge, they wrote that “Those who fight Communism on the home front are as much Soldiers for Freedom as our sons who fought the BEAST in Korea”.²⁵⁶

More complex than the goal of purging individual instructors with radical backgrounds was the potential of wider educational philosophy to influence America’s political landscape. Schrecker characterizes engagement in this area as “the ultraconservative version [of McCarthyism] peddled by patriotic groups and right-wing activists that manifested itself in campaigns to purge textbooks of favorable references to the United Nations”. School board campaigns over assigned readings and curricula were indeed one of the most fruitful activities for community anticommunists, but it is also crucial to acknowledge that education was a hot topic across the political spectrum. As one conservative pamphleteer correctly identified it, “Education cannot be divorced from politics, nor politics from education. As one goes, so goes the other”.²⁵⁷

The East Coast education theorists and idealistic pro-UNers — vilified by right-wing activists as crypto-Stalinists and world government conspiracists — did exist (if not necessarily in the form their opponents imagined them) and were equally embroiled in a battle for grassroots hearts and minds. Many of the new theories of learning that were in circulation during the years after World War Two — progressive education, as the admittedly reductive contemporary term had it — were political in nature. They understood that the world had changed

²⁵⁶ Folder 9-740, Box 9, *Counterattack* Files.

²⁵⁷ Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes*, p.xiv; *FACTS in Education, Inc.*, October-November 1954, Box 47, Radical Right.

immeasurably and was continuing to change, and that an effective way of influencing the behaviour of citizens in this new society was to control how they acquired their knowledge of it, and the ways in which they learned to think and make decisions for themselves. The education battle fought under the shadow of the Cold War was about independent thinking and holistic lesson plans versus rote learning and the three Rs, but it was also about liberal, internationalist values versus conservative, nationalistic ones. And the stakes were immense: as a *Newsweek* poem put it “Johnny had *better* learn to read. Because you can bet Ivan is spending a lot of time on *his* books”.²⁵⁸

Unsurprisingly, both factions tried to play down the ideological nature of the struggle, at least on their own side. Liberals saw themselves as advancing civilized values and protecting public education against “crackpots” and “reactionaries”; conservatives as battling progressive inroads into normal, traditional schooling. As we shall see, this framing was palpably untrue, particularly for conservatives: anticommunist and McCarthyite tactics were injected into the education debate, not to preserve schools as they were but to radically overhaul them. And, for a time, right-wing activists found success in their endeavours. In 1949, J. B. Matthews warned *American Legion Magazine* readers that communists were specifically targeting their children in schools and youth groups, through often-ingenuous methods. The Young People’s Record Club, for instance, offered a song called “Building a City” on “unbreakable” ten-inch vinyl — which promised to introduce listeners aged two to six to the “wonderful sounds and motions [that] go into building a city [...] the carpenter,

²⁵⁸ *Newsweek*, undated clipping, *ibid.*

the painter, the steam shovel — all teaching your child new and exciting rhythm” — for free as an introduction to its \$1.99 a month subscription service. “There isn’t even a hint that manufacturers, construction companies, bankers, architects, draftsmen or capitalist enterprisers have anything to do with ‘Building a City’,” complained Matthews, noting that hundreds of schools had signed up for the service provided by this “subversive communist front”. Just as insidious were camps run by leftist groups — Camps Kinderland and Villa Buena Vista in New York, and Camp Midvale in New Jersey — that provided summer activities for some fifty thousand children, according to Matthews.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁹ *Life*, 15 November 1948, p.6; reprint from *American Legion Magazine*, December 1949, Folder 39, Box 3, Right-Wing Pamphlets.

To Thoughtful Parents of Creative Children ... Ages 2 to 6, 7 to 11
The Young People's Record Club Offers

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Image 17: An advertisement for the "subversive" "Building a City" recording, *Life*, 15 November 1948.

By establishing in the minds of at least some concerned parents that communists might use devious methods to introduce subversive ideas to even the youngest of schoolchildren, campaigners were able to justify their own politicization of the contents of school libraries and textbooks — their demand that only books which sang the virtue of capitalism and patriotism be permitted. Equally as

troubling as the threat of individual subversive texts was the idea that an entire educational philosophy could, at best, leave children weak-willed in the face of foreign ideologies and, at worst, actively encourage students to seek dangerous ideas out. For conservatives, these fears coalesced into a generalized opposition to what they saw as progressive education — loosely, the increasingly popular strand of modern scholastic thinking that stemmed from the work of John Dewey and looked to promote problem-solving abilities and a wider range of life skills, as opposed the rote repetition of facts. More than simply a dangerously non-traditional approach to learning, for many conservatives and anticommunists progressive education represented nothing less than the collectivist philosophy of Karl Marx in a different form.

Pamphlets such as America's Future, Inc.'s *How Progressive is Your School?* offered a "quick, easy, sure" checklist for parents who were concerned their child might be in danger of falling under the progressive influence. Instead of "numerical or alphabetical grading of daily work or tests", a progressive school might return papers "marked only with an 'S'" and consider failure of a test to have "no special implication". While the purported aim of such a grading system was to prevent the student "acquir[ing] a sense of failure", the pamphlet informed parents, the real world result of such pampering would be a child "unprepared to cope with failure in adult life and thus predisposed towards Socialism, under which his security will be planned for him". Worse still, with his "ignorance" seen as "socially acceptable," the young future citizen "will have only respect for force under the rule of dictatorship". The influential anticommunist writer Irene Corbally Kuhn, meanwhile, alerted *American Legion Magazine*

readers to the dangers posed by high-profile progressive education advocates like Dr William Kilpatrick and former Pasadena school superintendent Willard Goslin by warning “Your Child is Their Target” and juxtaposing photographs of the well-known educators with an image of Adolf Hitler inspecting his Hitler Youth cadres.²⁶⁰



Image 18: *American Legion Magazine*, June 1952, Folder 206, Box 13, Right-Wing Pamphlets.

Though the Sapulpa book burning was a one-off — educational campaigners were generally savvy enough to avoid associating their own actions with such explicitly totalitarian imagery — the loaded phraseology highlights a difficulty in the study of schools-based anticommunism. Far from benignly succumbing to McCarthyist suspicion and degradation, liberals offered significant opposition

²⁶⁰ "How Progressive is Your Child", Folder 72, Box 5, Right-Wing Pamphlets; Reprint from *American Legion Magazine*, June 1952, Folder 206, Box 13, Ibid.

towards counter-subversion in education, and a sophisticated attempt to highlight its supposed extremism. To many progressive commentators, the conservative educational campaigners of the early 1950s were all “book burners”, whether they took a torch to classic literature, or merely opposed the experimental education methods of a prominent school superintendent. That this opposition tended to portray conservative organizing around education as a neo-fascist, mob-assault on hard-won enlightenment values is problematic in that it reflected an ideological and prejudiced standpoint, one that diminished liberal culpability for the excesses of McCarthyism and one that red scare scholars have been quick to identify and dismiss.

James B. Conant, reviewing David Hulburd’s book-length report *This Happened in Pasadena* for the *New York Times Book Review*, likened the enforced 1950 resignation of “progressive” educator Willard Goslin to both a wild-west lynching and to the Birmingham, England riots of 1791, when a mob of local “Church-and-King” loyalists burned the home of dissident theologian Joseph Priestley. Hulburd himself, clearly sympathetic to the embattled superintendent and to liberal concerns over conservative activism, did not shy away from viewing events in Pasadena through the widest possible political lens. “In these uneasy days, honest, well-meaning citizens are often vulnerable to the campaigns of all sorts of infiltrating minority pressure groups,” he warned, before quoting Goslin’s own maxim that “Freedom and democracy as we know them exist only on this continent at the present time”.²⁶¹

²⁶¹ *New York Times Book Review*, 29 April 1951; David Hulburd, *This Happened in Pasadena* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1951), p.163.

It is easy to identify a discrepancy between such a hyperbolic reading of the events in Pasadena and the bare facts of the case — that a high-profile, highly paid schools superintendent arrived in a relatively conservative town, promised grand reforms but stumbled when proposals to raise the educational tax levy were soundly defeated on election day; that his standing in the community never really recovered and he was eventually asked to resign by the school board. Far from being haunted by visions of McCarthyism or worse, Catholic columnist John B. Sheerin saw in fears of “red-hot reactionaries” at work in Pasadena a “pretty shabby piece of strategy for the [National Education Association] to draw a red herring across the trail in order to divert attention from the swelling chorus of genuine criticism” aimed at the city’s school system. The true nature of the Pasadena affair lies somewhere in between, but the fact that some contemporary liberals undoubtedly overstated the totalitarian aspect to the grassroots campaigns against Goslin should not deny the existence or diminish the significance of a genuine politically-motivated, conservative faction to the anti-Goslin forces. It was a faction that utilized anticommunist tactics, and foreshadowed the education-based actions of the Minute Women and others.²⁶²

Goslin was no naïve innocent when he accepted the position of the superintendent in charge of the Pasadena school system on 29 April 1948. While the extent of his advocacy of so-called progressive education is debatable, he was fully cognizant of the political potential of the educator’s role. “The primary

²⁶² John B. Sheerin, “What Was the Question at Pasadena”, in Cecil Winfield Scott ed., *Public Education Under Criticism* (New York: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1954), p.94.

purpose of the public school is not to get a bright boy a soft white-collar job," he explained when asked to define his philosophy of educational reform. "[It is] to underwrite and extend democracy in this country." If his appointment and the events leading to his dismissal became an unexpected national news story, his tenure in the City of Roses would have been a major event in the world of American education even without the Cold War overtones. Wealthy, sun-bleached Pasadena already boasted a highly regarded school system when, in 1948, it set about replacing outgoing superintendent John Sexson. In his twenty years on the job, Sexson had overseen an educational programme that, by the mid-1930s, was ranked one of the top five in the nation. He was aided in his success by the demographics of Pasadena. Some ten miles northeast of downtown Los Angeles but psychically far removed, bordered by the San Rafael Hills to the west and the San Gabriel Mountains to the north, the city was declared the finest place to live in all of America by psychologist Edward Thorndike in his 1939 survey of three hundred communities. By the late 1940s Pasadena's prosperous citizenry had begun to shift somewhat in nature, as economic boom and Los Angeles' enveloping sprawl pushed its population above the one hundred thousand mark, but it remained a remarkably well-to-do community. Seventy-one per cent of its residents owned their own homes, while its citizens boasted the fifth highest average purchasing power in the nation — prosperity the typical Pasadenan had traditionally been happy to lavish on the education of its thirty-four thousand school students.²⁶³

²⁶³ *The New York Times*, 8 March 1969; *Los Angeles Times*, 24 June 1951, p.B1.

With one nationally known educator retiring, Pasadena's five-strong school board looked to recruit an equally prestigious replacement — "the biggest man in the country," as they put it. They found him in the form of the president of the American Association of School Administrators — a position held by Sexson himself ten years previously — and superintendent of Minneapolis schools, Willard Goslin. The fifty-year-old accepted Pasadena's job offer — and its generous remuneration package of \$17,500 per year plus automobile allowance (a salary bettered only by those handed out by the much larger school systems of Philadelphia and San Francisco) — and in July arrived in Southern California. As he endured what he called the "knife and fork circuit" that summer — audiences with his new home's myriad civic societies, its Chamber of Commerce and Kiwanis, Rotarians and women's leagues — Goslin could have had little idea that the prominent citizens now happily plying him with endless chicken dinners would soon be lining up to take sides in a vicious battle over his own employment, and the educational future of the city. Nevertheless, before he was halfway through a four year contract, Goslin found himself in the middle of what one school board member would later describe as "a cataclysm of strife, bitterness, name calling, smearing and defamation of character, an emotional binge of such proportions that it defies description."²⁶⁴

Despite the obvious appeal of such a narrative, it would be wrong to imagine Goslin as a freewheeling educational radical sweeping into town to overhaul a dusty old school system against its will. Pasadena already operated a somewhat

²⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 17 June 1951, p. B1; Hulburd, *This Happened in Pasadena*, p. 24; *Los Angeles Times*, 24 June 1951, p. B1.

unorthodox classroom structure whereby all students received an additional two years of “junior college” tuition beyond the standard twelve grades of elementary and high school learning, while Goslin’s predecessor Sexson had previously been criticized as an advocate of suspiciously modern teaching techniques himself. Yet, for whatever reason, Goslin’s regime ignited passions among Pasadenans to an extraordinary degree. The 2 June 1950 tax referendum that set in motion his eventual resignation was voted on by an astonishing thirty-two thousand citizens, some thirty-eight per cent of the entire electorate and around six times as many as turned out for the previous such vote thirteen years before. The ballot — in which a Goslin-backed proposal to expand the elementary school tax rate ceiling by fifty per cent, primarily to fund the construction of three new institutions, was defeated by a margin of two-to-one — was just the start of a feud that saw a community wracked by conflict and self-analysis, and activists from across the political spectrum grasping an opportunity to fight wider ideological struggles in microcosm.²⁶⁵

Removed from its potent Cold War context, the extensive surveying of the tax election and its aftermath suggests the role of anticommunist sentiment and grassroots conservative organizing was overstated. Of the 1150 respondents to a public opinion survey commissioned by a Pasadena teacher’s committee, around forty per cent of “no” voters cited “too many taxes already” as the prime factor behind their ballot, while twenty per cent pointed to general concerns about the efficient running of the school system, rather than specific fears over a subversive curriculum. In contrast, an overwhelming ninety per cent of those

²⁶⁵ Hulburd, *This Happened in Pasadena*, p. 24.

surveyed were happy for students to learn about all types of government (not solely the “American” capitalist democracy advocated by some conservative campaigners), and majorities backed the inclusion of sex education in high school curriculums, despite the vocal opposition of some. Moreover, only ten per cent used their vote to specifically object to “progressive education” and less than five per cent declared they had “no confidence” whatsoever in Goslin or the board of education.²⁶⁶

Nevertheless, something was unusual afoot in Pasadena to provoke such a conclusive rejection of Goslin’s budget proposal. For one, the apparent bout of fiscal conservatism was entirely out of step with the city’s usual approach to education funding. A \$5.15 million school bond issue had been accepted by voters less than two years previously at a ratio of six-to-one, while two years after the ballot that provoked their superintendent’s dismissal an almost identical increase in the educational tax levy was voted in, by the same margin it had previously been defeated. It also seems strange that a community so averse to upping their potential tax contribution to schools would be so enthusiastic — only a year later — about pooling their time and resources in order to investigate the collapse of the Goslin administration. Around one thousand citizens volunteered for the fourteen fact finding committees and one hundred and forty subcommittees established to “get Pasadena out of its mess” — as attorney and group leader James Boyle put it — while a \$45,000 budget was raised to pay a handful of eminent educators to help the community figure out why it had driven its own eminent educator out of town. From individual

²⁶⁶ *Los Angeles Times*, 11 September 1950, p. A1.

statements the survey revealed a generalized unease that the superintendent was an advocate of experimental, modern teaching techniques, who rejected the traditional focus on educational basics such as the three Rs — though the fact finding committees concluded that Goslin “never put in any changes of major importance” to the way Pasadena’s children were taught. Others had issues — whether ideological, practical or financial — with the administrator’s somewhat grand vision for improving the operation of the Pasadena system. Camps for children, weekly meetings of parents’ groups, extra training workshops for teachers featuring the sort of East Coast educators loathed by right-wing campaigners and educational traditionalists alike: all formed part of the case against Goslin, though few had ever made it past the proposal stage.²⁶⁷

What is certain is that there was a significant groundswell of conservative organizing against Goslin, and that the issues raised and tactics used by activists would have echoes throughout the early Cold War era. In early 1949, at a home on Pasadena’s renowned Orange Grove Avenue — a thoroughfare nicknamed Millionaires’ Row for its grand estates, including that of chewing gum magnate William Wrigley Jr. — a group of around seventy concerned citizens gathered to form the School Development Council. The SDC would eventually claim over a thousand members and be vilified and celebrated as prime movers in Goslin’s ouster. The initial meeting’s host, Majel Payne, was the wife of an insurance executive and the mother of Pasadena high schooler Eleanor Payne, who would demonstrate the family’s local prominence by being crowned the 1951 queen of the famous Tournament of Roses. Other significant members included a

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 17 June 1951, p.B1; *Ibid.*, 18 June 1951, p.A1; *Ibid.*, 22 June 1951, p.A1.

physician named Ernest Brower, physicians' wives Frances Bartlett and Janet Schwartz, physician's daughter Cay Hallberg and senator's daughter Louise Padelford. More than just a collection of well-connected, upwardly mobile citizens, the SDC leadership proved sophisticated and determined activists. Glamorous socialite Padelford, a Columbia University PhD holder and the wife of an executive at film technology company Technicolor, founded the Pasadena unit of national right-wing organization Pro America. Bartlett, according to David Hulburd, "was avidly interested in what she thought were the subversive influences in the schools" and did "an enormous amount of research" on the textbooks, visiting lecturers and other associations attached to Goslin's regime. Schwartz, meanwhile, carried the SDC's message out of state in speeches that railed against the evils of the modern educational methods employed in her hometown.²⁶⁸

The new group's first goal was to work to prevent the election of two "socialists" during the 1949 school board election. When the tax issue heated up in 1950, the SDC allied with the Pasadena Chamber of Commerce and the Property Owners Division of the Realty Board to produce their own analysis of the schools budget, along with an alternative proposal offering savings of \$225,000. Though Goslin rejected their figures — and, indeed, offered a line-by-line critique of its alleged errors — an important new narrative had been established. The local Star-News newspaper wrote that the SDC report "*proves* that the Pasadena Elementary School budget can be safely cut so that no increase in tax rate will be necessary". Much more than simply the new superintendent's lack of fiscal restraint, the SDC

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 19 June 1951, p.A1; Hulburd, *This Happened in Pasadena*, p.58.

and its allies stood opposed to all manner of perceived flaws in the Goslin regime. “I found my daughter was bringing home a peculiar Socialistic philosophy from junior high,” reported Ernest Brower. “Children have been educated emotionally to feel a Socialistic government is fine, that the world owes them a living, that security is the main thing in life.” A Goslin proposal to establish a year-round mountain camp where classes of children from Pasadena schools might be sent to learn about outdoor living was opposed, not because the SDC objected to the idea of a camp, but because it feared “entrusting our children to Socialist-minded educators without proper parental influence.” In the months following the SDC’s tax election triumph, the State Senate Investigating Committee on Education — chaired by arch anticommunist Nelson Dilworth — was summoned to survey the Pasadena system. Its 102-page report included twenty pages analysing the textbook *American Democracy, Today and Tomorrow* — a copy of which was discovered by Janet Schwartz in the Pasadena schools book depository prior to its introduction into classrooms — and noted among the text’s bibliography citations of the work of twenty-eight “subversive authors”.²⁶⁹

One charge against the SDC that can probably be discounted is that it was controlled from afar by Allen Zoll’s National Council for American Education. This fitted a popular liberal narrative of professional anticommunists: “full-time complainers”, as Benjamin Fine imagined them, “frighten[ing] a good many people” and “inflam[ing]” the minds of those less well informed than someone like himself. A single Zoll-authored pamphlet, “Progressive Education Increases

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.85, my italics; *Los Angeles Times*, 20 June 1951, p. A1; *Ibid.*, 18 June 1951.

Delinquency”, was apparently an item of discussion at one SDC meeting, but did not form a major plank of their anti-Goslin campaign — indeed, according to John Sheerin, even NEA investigator Robert Skaife only claimed the pamphlet influenced four thousand of the thirty-two thousand tax election voters. In actuality, Allen Zoll was a useful straw man for outside observers on both sides of the argument. *Los Angeles Times* columnist Chester Hanson, in early 1952, wrote an article lambasting the NEA for clinging to the myth of Zoll as a “general chief of staff” for the SDC in the Pasadena affair. In fact, he insisted, the group were merely “interested in his views on progressive education” and immediately disavowed the campaigner when they were made aware of what Hanson euphemistically termed Zoll’s “racial minority problems”. Yet in protesting the NEA’s focus on Zoll, Hanson — and other outsiders sympathetic to the SDC like him — were also guilty of obfuscating the issue. The SDC were no Allen Zoll-led “stooges”. They were perfectly capable of mounting their own conservative-inspired, ideological campaign without the input of a shady fixer, of collecting and applying ideas from the wider network of anticommunist, anti-progressive education writers and campaigners including, but not limited to, Zoll’s NCAE.²⁷⁰

²⁷⁰ Scott, ed., *Public Education Under Criticism*, p.95; *Los Angeles Times*, 3 March 1952.

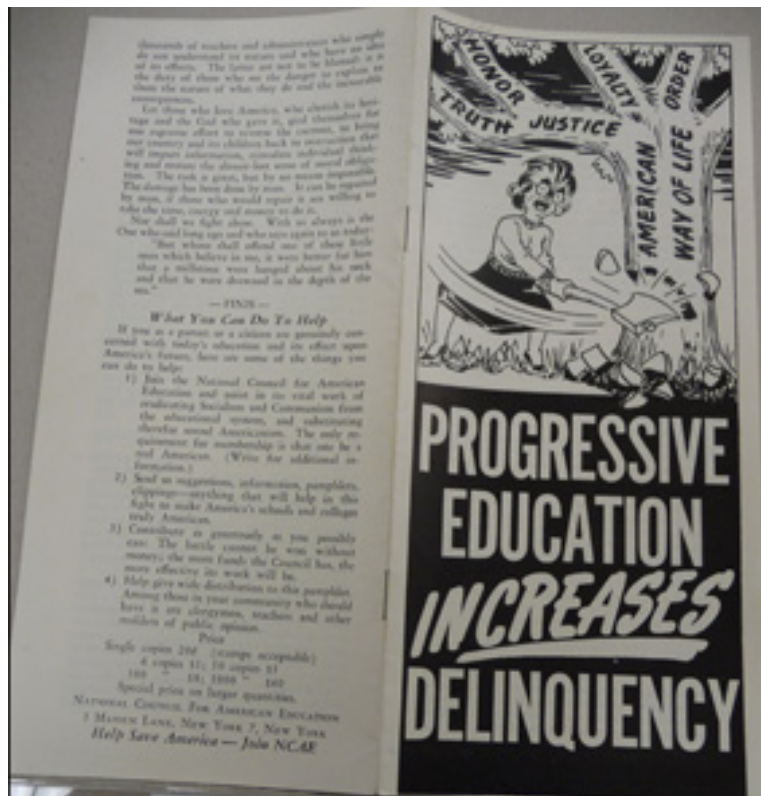


Image 19: *Progressive Education Increases Delinquency*, Box 48, Radical Right.

The wider citizenry of Pasadena was also seemingly receptive to conservative ideas. One of the more heated school board meetings dealt with Goslin's April 1950 proposal to adjust the catchment area boundaries for the city's junior high schools. A packed school auditorium heard white residents from the eastern bank of the Arroyo Seco argue that their children should be allowed to attend the schools in the wealthy, all-white neighbourhoods around Linda Vista boulevard, on the stream's west bank, rather than the nearer multi-racial institutions to their east. The president of the Pasadena Realty Board claimed that the "proposed change in zoning [would] have a definite effect on property values" while homeowners aired fears that the redistricting would be eventually extended to elementary schools, further eroding the "natural social community" of prosperous whites whose homes flanked the Arroyo. School board president

Milton Wopschall, while approving Goslin's junior high proposal, claimed the superintendent had balked over altering elementary school boundaries in the face of the racially-motivated opposition. "The colored question was with us and will always be with us," he said. Majel Payne of SDC, meanwhile, blamed Pasadena's "colored question" not on anxious white parents, but outside agitators who attended the meeting. "They cried about discrimination and Jim Crowism and minority groups, distorting everything to cause confusion and unhappiness," she reported.²⁷¹

Sex education was another area of education policy that apparently inflamed ordinary Pasadenans and the more organized SDC members alike. In 1949, rumours flew that elementary school principals were preparing to show a film titled *Human Growth* to children from all age groups. Following protests, a group of teachers and parents organized a screening of the film and succeeded in having it withdrawn from classrooms. When questioned by the Dilworth committee a year later, Goslin stated that he had never been in favour of offering under-11s sex education — *Human Growth* had been intended for tenth grade biology classes — but ammunition had been added to the case against a dangerously "modern," "progressive" and "socialist" regime in Pasadena, one that "usurp[ed] the family prerogative" to instruct, or not instruct, one's children about the birds and bees.²⁷²

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 20 June 1951.

²⁷² *Ibid.*

Following the tax election, the SDC continued the campaign against the Goslin regime while at the same time increasing the overtly anticommunist nature of its rhetoric. An open letter dated 11 July 1950 and sent to local and Los Angeles newspapers demanded two main reforms: “an ideological investigation of curriculum, methods and personnel within the Pasadena School District” and loyalty oaths to be signed “by administrators and teachers [...] stipulating dismissal for those who refused to sign.” In an acknowledgement of the wider conservative network within which the SDC now saw itself, the letter suggested the school board might recruit “such patriotic organizations as the American Legion and Sons and Daughters of the American Revolution” to help investigate the “politico-social aims” of the Goslin administration. Telltale signs of these aims were everywhere. A handbook on audio-visual education included the incriminating observation that “democracy has often failed in the past” (“Is this part of a campaign to ‘sell’ our children on the collapse of our way of life and substitution of collectivism,” the SDC wondered.) The same text suggested playing “The Star-Spangled Banner” to amuse students while their teacher changed reels during whatever film they were watching: even this seemingly patriotic suggestion was loaded with subversive intent, it was claimed, as the subsequent clause “or any popular war song” subtly connected the American national anthem with “warmongering”.²⁷³

The impact of the SDC’s work can be seen in Goslin’s resignation and its aftermath. While his failure to secure an expanded school budget may have ultimately made the superintendent’s position untenable, it was his

²⁷³ Hulburd, *This Happened in Pasadena*, p.105-107.

“controversial” status (if not any specific incidence of unacceptably outré policy-making) that encouraged four of the five school board members to write asking Goslin to stand down on 8 November 1950. “In our opinion the main controversy in Pasadena settles itself around you as an individual,” the message read. “Therefore it becomes our very sad duty to suggest to you [...] that you resign because we no longer feel that the situation can be resolved.” As Goslin stepped down — not quietly, as the school board hoped, but with a speech to a packed school board meeting — the “controversy” framing of the situation continued to influence reactions.²⁷⁴

Melvin Morse, identified by the *Los Angeles Times* as a “typical” Pasadenan parent, without a stake in either camp, exemplified the impact of this tendency. “The issue was Mr. Goslin — not how he taught school but what else he wanted to teach,” he explained. “I couldn’t write an indictment of him. I was just afraid of him. He divided this community. I don’t think it was a progressive education controversy. I think it was one on social philosophies”. In the wake of the superintendent’s removal, the SDC squared up against a second large faction of parents and prominent citizens. Calling themselves the Committee on Public Education, they were horrified by the manner of Goslin’s firing (by telegram, while he was in New York) and embarrassed by the national attention on the furore. Yet though they stood in firm opposition to the impolite tactics and recalcitrant politics of the SDC, rather than demand the superintendent’s

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

reinstatement, or mount a spirited defence of progressive educational methods, COPE sought to broker compromise.²⁷⁵

The SDC may not have inspired the majority of Pasadenan voters to turn against Goslin with their claims that his educational philosophies would lead to socialism, communism and free love but in attaching the stigma of controversy to him they were able to convince moderates that the city would be better off without their high profile superintendent, if only for a quieter life. Conservatives further exploited this tactic in the aftermath of the scandal, creating a strange dichotomy whereby opponents of Goslin would simultaneously reject the NEA's claim that an organized, political campaign had been waged against the superintendent and laud "ordinary" citizens specifically for kicking un-American ideas out of Pasadena. "Why was it wrong for us, as parents, to protest what we considered to be a studied attempt from outside to take over our school procedures and to indoctrinate collectivism, Socialistic tendencies and unlimited UNESCO ideas of world government as opposed to traditional American beliefs," *Los Angeles Times* writer Ed Ainsworth imagined this proverbial "middle-of-the-road" Pasadenan asking.²⁷⁶

In fact, those who subscribed to the more vivid objections to Willard Goslin were anything but middle-of-the-road in their thinking, or "hard-to-arouse" politically. The SDC activists — like other grassroots anticommunists — were determined, intellectually well equipped, radical in their views, and influential beyond their

²⁷⁵ *Los Angeles Times*, 18 June 1951, p.A1.

²⁷⁶ *Los Angeles Times*, 22 January 1953, p.2.

numbers. Their enduring victory was not in “red-baiting” an innocent school administrator out of a job — numerous other factors contributed to Goslin’s downfall in Pasadena, plenty of them self-inflicted. It was in connecting their cause to the wider concerns of a conservative community, and in reframing the debate so that what was once uncontroversial became “a radical change to the ‘American way’” — as right-wing newsletter *News and Views* had it — and the middle ground took on a distinctly right-wing hue. By mid-1951 — when Pasadenans conferred their support on the new caretaker regime of acting superintendent Frank Walkup by voting through a school tax increase — a series of concessions had been made to the SDC. Infamous biology film *Human Growth* had been barred from Pasadena’s classrooms, teachers’ workshops with “subversive” East Coast academics were a thing of the past, and a new procedure to screen textbooks and library books for their “loyalty factor” had been instituted.²⁷⁷

Assistant superintendent Gilchrist, a Goslin appointee, remained and remained a target for the SDC due to his past membership of educational organizations that “put out a Socialistic philosophy based on collectivism”, but George Gerbner, the editor of in-house Pasadena school system magazine *Clearing House*, was dismissed after being identified by Nelson Dilworth’s senate investigating committee. The SDC continued to fight for their vision of Pasadena’s school system. “You can’t hush up the controversy and say, ‘Goslin’s gone’,” Janet Schwartz announced. “Some of the books, especially those provided as

²⁷⁷ “Conflict in Education: The Pasadena Case”, *News and Views*, March 1951, Box 48, Radical Right.

supplementary readings, really bring pupils into the Communist front. Our theory is that a student should learn of his own country first. Once he knows that, you don't have to worry about which nation he will think best [...] I hope we can find someone in the schools who can detect propaganda in texts, even when a rejected text is rewritten, appears with a different title and subtle changes in its contents.”²⁷⁸

Frances Bartlett and Majel Payne, meanwhile, put their SDC experience to use setting up a new organization, FACTS in Education, Inc., which expanded their fight against progressive teaching methods and subversion in education. Standing for “Fundamental issues, Americanism, Constitutional government, Truth and Spiritual values”, the *FACTS* bimonthly newsletter characterized itself as “deeply concerned with the minds and hearts of the youth of our nation, and what goes into them via materials and teacher techniques channelled through our public school system” as well as “aware of, and alert to, the methods of Communist infiltration and Socialist propaganda dissemination currently at work in America, especially in the field of education”. Their pamphlet praised Senator McCarthy for his contribution to the conservative education struggle — crediting him with a “successful probe” into the stacks of American libraries overseas — and, in case there was any doubt that these grassroots schools campaigners identified with the wider anticommunist cause, declared that McCarthyism, “the symbol of Americanism, is identified with patriotism and loyalty to one’s own country”. As well as reporting on various educational conferences, *FACTS* offered lists of suspect texts to look out for in school

²⁷⁸ *Los Angeles Times*, 20 June 1951, p.A1; *Ibid.*, 21 June 1951.

libraries, and the usual reading recommendations from the likes of John T. Flynn and E. Merrill Root. In 1956, it reported on a “campaign to abolish Christmas” in schools in Sayreville, New Jersey and White Plains, New York, where the superintendent had cancelled the traditional nativity scene and prompted a thousand-strong parental protest. The move was apparently in deference to the objections of three local rabbis, though one speaker confided “I see Red in this whole thing”.²⁷⁹

Back in Pasadena, concerned citizens like Virginia Cassil kept the new superintendent on notice, sending repeated “requests for reconsideration of learning materials” regarding all manner of texts found in the city’s school libraries. In a lengthy correspondence, Cassil took offense at everything from an ADL pamphlet that suggested the arrival of black residents in a neighbourhood would not ruin property values, to the seemingly benign statement that “Americans are the most prosperous people in the world because of their democratic freedoms” in a book titled *Your Life as a Citizen*. “The dangers involved in our relinquishing National Sovereignty for a world government, should also be explained to the child”, Cassil noted on her completed form. While the rest of the Pasadena community settled back into life out of the political spotlight, neighbouring Los Angeles was enduring its own schools crisis.²⁸⁰

The United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization might seem an odd target for anticommunist ire, associated, as it is today, more with

²⁷⁹ *FACTS in Education, Inc.*, Vol. III, No. 1, Box 47, Radical Right.

²⁸⁰ Pasadena City Schools forms, Box 47, Radical Right.

preserving world heritage sites than fomenting global socialist revolution. Yet in the early 1950s few institutions save the politburo provoked as much revulsion among political patriots — at least those who had expanded their counter-subversive approach beyond the question of “are you now, or have you ever been...?” For these more holistic anticommunists, the United Nations was nothing short of a plot to achieve a global leftist government indistinguishable from one created by Soviet Russian conquest. UNESCO was its propaganda arm, “designed to be the funnel for every left wing theory and concept to facilitate their introduction into the minds of future citizens”, in the words of one former Minute Woman.²⁸¹

A so-called UNESCO programme had been enthusiastically adopted by the Los Angeles school system in 1945, shortly after the UN’s formation. A teachers’ manual *The E in UNESCO* — co-authored by the city’s schools superintendent Alexander Stoddard — would draw the bulk of the ensuing ire due to its supposed endorsement of subversive texts, but investigators eventually identified some fourteen ways in which the UN message was carried to students, including films and audio recordings to be presented in class, regular information bulletins for teachers, and events such as Brotherhood Week, World Trade Week and United Nations Week.²⁸²

Los Angeles’ “UNESCO plot” was first uncovered by a woman named Florence Fowler Lyons. A former *Denver Post* film critic, Lyons launched her personal

²⁸¹ McClay, *In the Presence of Our Enemies*, p.xii.

²⁸² *Los Angeles Times*, 19 January 1953, p.A1.

quest to expose subversive influences in education by producing a study criticising a series of textbooks called the *Building America* series, a condemnation that was adopted by the Senate Investigating Committee on Education in 1948. In October 1951 she exposed the use and promotion of *The E in UNESCO* in Los Angeles schools, sparking months of heated debate in the city, and setting her on the path to a national career as a speechmaker and expert on the insidious plan to promote so-called “world understanding” among American students — the “Greatest Subversive Plot in History”, according to conservative Idaho congressman John T. Wood.²⁸³

The Los Angeles backlash against UNESCO began quietly enough, with the curriculum division of the city’s Board of Education temporarily halting courses associated with the organization due to the “controversial nature of the subject”. But by mid-1952 it was clear that capitulating to the demands of anti-UNESCO activists was not going to make the problem go away. “This program is in effect today and permeating our schools despite official statements to the contrary,” insisted Helen Keating of the Women’s Breakfast Club as she presented a petition demanding the total removal of a UNESCO agenda that was “designed to destroy the love for America as a sovereign nation, American institutions and traditions, and undermine American home influences in the minds of our children”.²⁸⁴

Debate over UNESCO — the school system’s “hot potato”, according to the *Los Angeles Times* — continued at Board of Education meetings throughout the

²⁸³ “The Menace in UNESCO”, speech by Florence Fowler Lyons to the Col. Frank Brezina Post 5431 of the Veterans Foreign Wars, 18 November 1952, Box 11, Radical Right; *Congressional Record*, 18 October 1951, Folder 208, Box 13, Right-Wing Pamphlets.

²⁸⁴ *Los Angeles Times*, 19 January 1953, p.A1; *Ibid.*, 11 April 1952, p.A1.

summer of 1952. Existential arguments were forwarded on both sides: Mrs A.M. Knox of the tenth district PTA insisted that “international understanding and co-operation do not [...] lessen our loyalty and devotion to our own country”, while Mrs Edward Suchman countered that giving into the “gang” of UNESCO supporters would mean “Russia will be able to take us over without firing a shot”. As with the female-led anticommunist groups discussed in the previous chapter, the most vocal of the Women’s Breakfast Club members and other anti-UNESCO campaigners were middle-aged, conservative women — the sort of people who dressed demurely in dark clothes and ever present hats and who preferred to be addressed using their husband’s Christian name rather their own. The *Los Angeles Times* picture editor who illustrated the report on the 21 July 1952 Board of Education meeting was presumably delighted to be able to make the striking juxtaposition between the fussily, almost Victorian attired Mrs Suchman and her infinitely more modern-looking debating opponent, fresh-faced 17-year-old Pamela Painter. A Mrs. Raymond, meanwhile, spoke up for the squeezed middle ground — aptly illustrating once again the greatest success of the grassroots anticommunist campaign — stating that she “couldn’t see why such a highly controversial program should be inserted in the curriculum before the parents have been consulted”.²⁸⁵

The meetings became more ill-tempered with each round of debate. On 21 August, organizers were reduced to switching the lights off in the auditorium in a bid to quell the arguments among the three hundred attendees, and to compel the more than forty speakers to adhere to their two-minute time limits. Five

²⁸⁵ *Los Angeles Times*, 22 July 1952, p.A1.

hundred audience members, including fifty-five speakers, turned up four days later — many armed with signs proclaiming UNESCO supporters to be “Enemies of America”, others with copies of Senator McCarthy’s manifesto *McCarthyism* — and the raucous behaviour continued. Board of Education members trooped off stage when one would-be speaker ignored their insistence that he was not allowed a second chance to air his views; when they returned, police officers had positioned themselves by the hall’s doors. Among those struggling to make themselves heard above the throng were representatives of the broad scope of the unofficial grassroots anticommunist coalition. James Law of the American Legion insisted the school board “reject in its entirety” the UNESCO programme, William Gale of the VFW confirmed his organization “opposed world government no matter how it is disguised” and Richard Payne, president of the Los Angeles Freedom Club, offered his group’s backing to the anti-UNESCO fight. Grassroots, specifically anticommunist groups including the Liberty Belles and the American Public Relations Forum also lent their support to the cause.²⁸⁶

²⁸⁶ *Life*, 15 September 1952, p.125.



Image 20: How *Life* magazine reported Los Angeles' UNESCO battle, *Life*, 15 September 1952.

Finally it came time for the board to vote on the resolutions, submitted by its most outspokenly conservative member Edith Stafford, to deal with the disputed UNESCO programme. In front of another five hundred-strong audience, a unanimous vote was cast in favour of a commitment to the “impartial and

factual” treatment of supposedly “controversial” material — the United Nations was not mentioned by name, but Stafford assured an audience member that the international organization and its subsidiaries were certainly covered by this “controversial” remit. A new policy instituting oversight of future suspect curriculum inclusions was also approved without dissent, while the most high profile resolution — the banning of *The E in UNESCO* — passed with just one opponent. It was a comprehensive victory for the counter-subversive campaigners. As in Pasadena, an initially unremarkable target — far removed from the mainstream fears of the McCarthy age — was opposed vehemently, debated vigorously and eventually condemned: not as an unequivocal evil, but as a troublesome, undesirably political problem. “I don’t rank [UNESCO] with Communism,” explained Board member Harry Hillman. “[B]ut it must be taught in the manner our students are taught about Communism [...] factually and with no advocacy thereof”. His colleague Ruth Cole, meanwhile, insisted that the “teachings of the school must be protected from any and all interests seeking to indoctrinate children” — notwithstanding, apparently, the interests who had just succeeded in labelling the United Nations as at least potentially subversive. Board president Paul Burke contrasted his opposition to indoctrination as evidenced by the UNESCO programme with the apparently non-contradictory demand that “we should make sure strong and constant emphasis is placed on loyalty for, and love of our country and all American ideals”.²⁸⁷

Opposition to the United Nations and its agencies did not stem simply from a conspiracist extension of McCarthyist fears of foreign subversion. A *Los Angeles*

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 29 August 1952, p.1.

Times reader named Paul Nelson articulated some of the problematic elements — at least for conservatives and libertarians — found within the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. “I believe,” wrote Nelson, “the intent of Articles 23, 24 and 25 as well as other articles is to advocate the inherent right of everyone to a minimum subsistence along with the obligation of society to provide the same”. Not that Nelson had any quarrel with the concept of minimum subsistence, rather he worried that such a right “would necessarily require some group or entity to assume the obligation to supply this subsistence” and that that group would necessarily impose some conditions on the recipients. The result of these various leaps of logic, the letter writer reasoned, would be “nothing but slavery”.²⁸⁸

While the most dramatic battles of Los Angeles schools’ UNESCO crisis were complete, the controversy dragged on for many more months. In early 1953 a Board of Education fact-finding group absolved the organization of accusations of communist domination and one-worldism, leading to the hasty formation of a fifty-person Emergency Citizens Committee to echo Edith Stafford’s call to postpone any decision on the new report until yet more public hearings were organized. However, despite campaigners’ fears that it would pave the way for the resumption of UNESCO teaching — albeit in a severely curtailed form — a couple of days later the board once again sided with the anticommunist faction, and voted to purge all references to the organization from the Los Angeles curriculum. “I personally believe that UNESCO is a propaganda agency, that it is

²⁸⁸ *Los Angeles Times*, 9 September 1952, p.A4.

infiltrated by loose thinkers, and that it does advocate one-world government,” announced board member Hillman to rapturous applause.²⁸⁹

A unanimous resolution passed: “There shall be no official or unofficial UNESCO program in the Los Angeles Schools, and the UNESCO program in the Los Angeles Schools, and the UNESCO chairmanships and central advisory committee shall be abolished”. Stafford’s proposal — to ban all school clubs or activities that made any mention of the United Nations — was considered a step too far by her colleagues, but it was in all other respects a near-complete adoption of the conservative stance. The attempt of UNESCO to explain to American schoolchildren its mandate of expanding educational opportunities around the globe had been officially classified as the sort of dubious material that required “rigid scrutiny” for possible bias before being exposed to young eyes. Perhaps wisely, considering the fate of his Pasadena counterpart, superintendent Stoddard, that one time UNESCO advocate, opted not to comment.²⁹⁰

As with the defeat of Willard Goslin, a famous victory for the grassroots anticommunist activists was framed as an even-handed compromise in the right-leaning *Los Angeles Times*. It was, an editorial surmised, a “common sense solution” by the Board of Education, as no matter how “worthy” the organization’s objectives, it was simply “a fact that UNESCO has developed a cult of followers, in this country at least, who see in it a vehicle for indoctrinating the coming generation with ideals of ‘one world’ and similar globaloney”. The

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 20 January 1953, p.1.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

proudly McCarthyist *Chicago Daily Tribune*, meanwhile, hailed a triumph of American patriotism under the headline “Los Angeles Cleans Up Its Schools”. A few months after the UNESCO purge, the Board of Education cemented its opposition to insidious internationalism, reversing a previous decision to accept a \$335,000 grant from the Ford Foundation for the on-the-job training of ninety new teachers. Edith Stafford and Ruth Cole had conducted a swift and effective campaign against the grant in the pages of the virulently right-wing Hearst tabloid the *Los Angeles Herald and Express* — which presented the two women as the upholders of “100 per cent Americanism” in the city’s schools, and the charitable institution as “a group of One World zealots who despise American patriotism” — and were quickly able to persuade three of their four male colleagues to switch their votes to oppose the “UNESCO-tinged” funds.²⁹¹

The pattern of exposure, heated debate, controversy and eventual compromise was repeated in Houston, Texas — this time spearheaded by the local chapter of the Minute Women of the USA, one of the national organization’s most active branches — eventually leading to the dismissal of deputy school superintendent George Ebey. The Houston activists formed a front with the Americanism Committee of the city’s American Legion department and the Committee for the Preservation of Methodism — a conservative church group dedicated to fighting the progressive Methodist Federation for Social Action. Their first action was to protest the 1952 edition of an annual, national Methodist church-organized event known as Race Relations Sunday. Speaker Dr Rufus E. Clement, the

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 22 January 1953, p.A4; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 23 January 1953, p.18; *Los Angeles Herald and Examiner*, 18 June 1953, clipping reprinted by Keep America Committee, Box 11, Radical Right.

African-American president of Atlanta University, was attacked for his supposedly subversive views — notwithstanding his support for Booker T. Washington's accommodationist philosophy of racial harmony and his conservative reputation within the black community. The action helped foster a working relationship among right-wingers that would bear fruit during the following year's school board crisis.²⁹²

Houston Minute Women also mobilized against United Church Women leader T. H. Tennent after she endorsed the United Nations, with members phoning her at half-hour intervals throughout the night. The decision by local radio station KPRC to cancel John T. Flynn's show brought a similarly swift response: it only took twenty-four hours of Minute Women telephone campaigning for Flynn's programme to return to the airwaves. Like their national sisters, the Houston women were particularly agitated by the threat posed to the education of American children by UNESCO and, by March 1952, had set about removing the stain of world federalism from Houston's schools. According to Don Carleton, "a natural coalition evolved between the Mills machine [a reference to the influence wielded by Hubert Mills, the conservative business manager of the Houston school system], Minute Women, Committee for the Preservation of Methodism, Doctors for Freedom, and Red Scare activists from the American Legion" under the banner of the Committee for Sound American Education. A Minute Women-authored pamphlet argued that UNESCO taught children disloyalty, poisoned the minds of teachers and aimed for moral corruption through sex education.²⁹³

²⁹² Carleton, *Red Scare*, p.145.

²⁹³ *Ibid*, p.168.

While the Houston Minute Women's UNESCO fears were shared both by their fellow CSAE activists and the wider anticommunism movement, the chapter utilized signature tactics in this battle against creeping socialism. When the University of Houston's president condemned the Minute Women and their allies as enemies of academic freedom and a danger to public education, a number of the chapter's members enrolled in classes for the spring 1953 semester, with particular emphasis on the College of Education — a veritable hotbed of progressive teaching methods, according to local conservatives. Minute Women attempts to monitor lectures for signs of un-American activity soon faltered, however, when many of the amateur sleuths proved just as susceptible to boredom and frustration with the rigours of academic life as their fellow students. Perhaps most audaciously, and counterfactually, the Minute Women at one point sent out a report informing their fellow Houstonians that "troops flying the United Nations flag once took over several American cities in a surprise move, throwing the mayors in jail and locking up the police chiefs". It is unrecorded how many people questioned the provenance of this remarkable bit of little known modern history.²⁹⁴

Unlike their counterparts in Los Angeles and Pasadena, the Houston anticommunists did not happen upon a previously unnoticed aspect of their city's school system to find the most high profile target of their counter-subversive campaign. After grumbling about various suspiciously liberal elements of Houston education for a number of months, they had already done

²⁹⁴ *Time*, 2 November 1953.

their homework by the time George Ebey began his new position — and were able to distribute a mimeographed pamphlet titled *We've Got Your Number, Dr. Ebey* before the California educator had even arrived in the city to take up his post. A year, countless newsletters and meetings, and one three hundred-page loyalty report authored by ex-FBI men later, the school board came to vote on extending Ebey's initial twelve-month contract. Predictably, it was not the deputy superintendent's (now officially non-subversive) record that saw him out of a job, dismissed by a vote of four to three. It was, as board member and deciding vote caster James Delmar articulated, his controversial nature, and the fact his appointment had divided the "entire community". "A new meaning has been given to the word controversial," observed reporter *Houston Post* Ralph O'Leary on the Ebey contretemps. "It now often becomes a derogatory epithet, frequently synonymous with the word Communist".²⁹⁵

The loose affiliations of patriots and anticommunists who participated in the education struggles of the early fifties did not find success wherever they attempted to take on the forces of "progressive education" and classroom subversion. In contrast to the suburbs of Pasadena and Los Angeles (with their right-wing politicians and new groundswells of mass grassroots conservatism), more politically traditional communities on the East Coast experienced similar outbreaks of activism with less dramatic results. In the Manhattan dormitory community of Scarsdale, New York, despite superficially similar demographics — one of the wealthiest towns in the most prosperous county of the state, with a five-to-one ratio of Republican voters — a schools red scare resolutely failed to

²⁹⁵ Carleton, *Red Scare*, p.218; *Time*, 2 November 1953.

take hold. A so-called Committee of Ten — led by a Manhattan broker named Otto Dohrenwend who had learned his counter-subversive tactics from *A Program for Community Anti-Communist Action* and popular preacher-turned-radio broadcaster called Father William Kernan — formed in 1949 to protest the contents of Scarsdale's school libraries, drawing support from the local American Legion post. Ironically, the conservative, traditionalist structure of the community's governance — upstanding citizens of this town of executives were appointed, rather than elected to serve on the school board and village board, hand-picked by prominent members of the influential Town Club and Women's Club — ultimately thwarted the campaign to remove books by Howard Fast and other "leftists" from the schools. Once the Town Club had placed a statement in the local *Scarsdale Inquirer* reading "We do not minimize the dangers of Communist and fascist indoctrination, but we want to meet these dangers in the American way", there was no risk the school board would ever side with the Committee of Ten.²⁹⁶

In general, though, the battle for ideological control of America's school boards, classrooms and libraries was an especially hard fought and fruitful one for the nation's domestic Cold Warriors. Prominently anticommunist organizations such as the Minute Women, Liberty Belles, Freedom Clubs and American Legion contributed troops to the fight, while groups nominally unconcerned with the wider struggle against socialist subversion — the School Development Council of Pasadena, the Women's Breakfast Club of Los Angeles — utilized McCarthyite

²⁹⁶ Robert Shaplen, "Scarsdale's Battle of the Books: How One Community Dealt with 'Subversive Literature'", *Commentary*, December 1950, pp.530-40, reproduced in Scott ed., *Public Education Under Criticism*, p.322.

tactics and superpatriotic rhetoric in the name of restoring traditional educational values. Though fundamentally local in nature, the schools crises of Pasadena, Los Angeles and Houston — and even smaller scale disturbances such as in Scarsdale — attracted national activists and tapped into national level debates about fundamental ideas of childhood and learning, debates that were carried out in the pages of conservative magazines and anticommunist pamphlets alike. This national lens also applied to those who watched in horror as Willard Goslin was forced to resign in Pasadena, and UNESCO books were pulled from Los Angeles library shelves. A deeply ideological campaign was being waged in liberal educational circles as well, albeit less ruthlessly, with bold visions of innovative educational techniques and the enlightened nurturing of future citizens emanating from Ivy League colleges and groups like the NEA. The sense of the world poised expectantly at the midpoint of the twentieth century was felt as keenly in education as it was anywhere, and it is perhaps no surprise that microcosmic wars of ideas should erupt in school systems around the country. Liberals were nevertheless wrong-footed by the spirited opposition they faced, and their reaction — labelling conservative schools activists as stooges, cranks and lynch mobs — served only to fuel an already well stoked persecution complex and steel community campaigners in what they already saw as an existential political fight.

The classroom counter-subversives were radicals — no matter how often they claimed to merely represent traditional values — and frequently advocated outrageous standpoints, but their sophistication and determination in injecting hard-line politics to an ostensibly neutral zone was startlingly effective. As

school board meetings turned into sympathetic venues for ultra-conservative ideas on patriotism, loyalty oaths, sex education and even the concept of public schools themselves, the centre ground subtly shifted. Previously unremarkable liberal concepts became “controversial” and certain right-wing ideas about the learning process were turned into acceptable compromises. Public education was one area where the grassroots anticommunists were able to belie their small numbers and genuinely influence, if only for a short time, public policy.

Conclusion

What were the achievements of the community-minded patriots, conservative crusaders and amateur sleuths who set out to fight communist subversion on the early Cold War home front? “The answer is bleak!” admitted Ed Gibbons and Norman Jacoby, the editors of *Alert*, in 1952. “Our successes are meagre [...] [w]e have not dented the complacency”. It was three years since the Los Angeles newsletter launched its “Community Teamwork Plan” and the authors were feeling downbeat about the ability and willingness of grassroots activists to stamp out leftist subversion. Partly the sour mood stemmed from personal struggles. After five years of publishing weekly editions of *Alert* as a full-time concern, the pair had been forced to concede that it was never going to be a profit-making venture. They would, they informed subscribers, be returning to their day jobs and continuing to issue their counter-subversive bulletin only as their spare time allowed. Never the well-heeled “professional anticommunists” of popular liberal conception — “*Alert* and its [e]ditors are in debt, hounded by insolent bill collectors,” they complained — Gibbons and Jacoby now returned to the ranks of enthusiastic hobbyists.²⁹⁷

The pair was equally gloomy about the wider struggle. The All-American Conference to Combat Communism, launched with much fanfare two years previously as a national locus for grassroots activism, was underfunded, ineffective and “sabotaged craftily from within”, and the picture was not much better on a town-by-town basis. “There are not in the entire USA one dozen

²⁹⁷ *Alert*, January 1952, Radical Right, Box 12.

active, well-run, adequately financed, effective anti-Communist local teamwork coalitions [comprising] most of the civic groups in any community,” they insisted — admittedly setting a fairly exacting standard for what could be considered an appropriate popular response to Cold War domestic issues.²⁹⁸

The assessment of Gibbons and Jacoby was overly pessimistic, myopic, and delivered only halfway through the period examined in this thesis. Nevertheless, elements rang true, and it is important to understand these failures before addressing the successes of amateur counter-subversion in the early Cold War. Despite the best efforts of “community teamwork” advocates, Americans proved largely reluctant to join the crusade. J. Edgar Hoover’s vision of responsible patriotic groups working to purge every town and city of leftist radicals did not come to pass. Liberal fears of anti-establishment mobs marching behind the demagogic figure of Joe McCarthy proved similarly overblown. Even in communities that did experience notable local-level red scares, the campaigns were usually concocted and enacted by small “cells” of activists, whose dedication to the cause led them to exercise an influence greater than their numerical strength. It is not hard to see why most scholars of the McCarthy era have dismissed the idea of Cold War anticommunism as a mass movement, and largely disregarded those who tried to foment such a revolt.

The grassroots red scare was a fringe concern and its marginality was a reflection of both the nature of the anticommunist cause and shape of American society. Mainstream politics, both Democratic and Republican, provided the

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

context and justification for nationwide Cold War engagement; conservative ideologues and professional counter-subversive networks supplied the ideological tools and encouragement; yet the gulf between apocalyptic rhetoric and the concrete reality of the domestic situation in the late forties and early fifties was vast. The looming international tension was one thing; the potential of America's few thousand card-carrying communists to become an effective fifth column should the worst happen — accepting the questionable premise that they actually wanted to do so — was another entirely. Even Stephen Whitfield, who has little time for the “American radicals as innocent victims of McCarthyism” narrative, is definitive: “Communism was a threat to the United States [...] it was not a threat *in* the United States”.²⁹⁹

The disconnection between polemic and practicality was doubly apparent on the community front. Even if a majority of citizens were persuaded of the necessity to drive pro-Soviet orators from their town — rather than simply ignore them — the opportunities for doing so were few and far between. For all that Hoover spoke of mass participation in the anticommunist crusade, his own organization's relentless obsession with the domestic left-wing — the resources he devoted to infiltrating supposed communist fronts, to exposing and prosecuting members — was a major factor in limiting the potential contribution of well-intentioned amateurs. Put simply, by the early 1950s, there were very few reds left to hunt.

²⁹⁹ Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War*, p.3. Italics in original.

From this perspective, it becomes less a question of why Americans chose not to rush to form neighbourhood red baiting outfits but why, given the fantastical nature of the quest, a significant number of them nevertheless did. The overwhelming majority of citizens opposed communism, in whatever sense they understood it, just as their leaders in Washington opposed it and the popular culture around them demonized it — but there was limited appetite for the sort of direct action against dissidents advocated by hard-liners. Political McCarthyists were divisive figures. Vigilantism — in terms of physical violence, but also the assumed extra-legal authority of “exposure” and denunciation — was frowned upon, and contradicted the tenets of small-c conservatism and quiet consensus Americanism that counter-subversion was supposed to be defending. Thus the sort of community-wide coalition envisaged in most of the grassroots anticommunist instructionals, and advocated somewhat disingenuously, by ultra-conservatives like the editors of *Alert*, was never likely to materialize. Still, as illustrated in this thesis, a small but persistent activist fringe emerged to reshape American community politics in the early Cold War. Some of them undertook purely personal quests, fighting the suspected enemy within via letters to newspapers, or phone calls to the FBI. More effectively, many thousands campaigned through new organizations, or existing patriotic bodies, and briefly occupied a vivid, troubled space within the American political scene.

These groups ranged from those that primarily addressed the Soviet threat — that spoke in terms of national security, and an ostensibly non-partisan necessity to safeguard the American way of life — to those that saw anticommunism as

one step in a process of rebuilding the American community in a new, more conservative mould. Yet, behind the surface presentation, the specifics of the two missions frequently blurred. From the broad-based patriotic message of the American Legion — with its more than three million members and central place within American civil society — to the nakedly political economic-libertarianism of the Freedom Clubs, grassroots groups on the Cold War home front shared many ideological positions only tangentially related to communist subversion. An average member of any of the major anticommunist organizations would have been instructed to oppose left-wing economic ideas and values — such as universal health care, redistributive income tax and an active trade union movement — as steps on the road to totalitarianism. He or she would be expected to be suspicious of modern educational methods in schools, as well as teaching that promoted progressive social values. Above all else, to be a true grassroots anticommunist was to instinctively defend an idealized version of the American national identity — from Soviet expansionism, of course, but also from the dread hand of liberal internationalism and the United Nations.

Despite these common platforms, community anticommunism was certainly not a monolithic movement. As the half-hearted attempts of the All-American Conference to Combat Communism to corral various independent bodies illustrated, it was more a loose affiliation of like-minded networks than a single, coherent entity. There were fundamental disagreements. Veterans, in general, argued for a wider American military role in the Cold War; others adopted a more isolationist stance, opposing the Legion-backed Universal Military Training Act and demanding immediate withdrawal from international alliances. Racism

was another dividing issue, serving largely to segregate the relatively more mainstream anticommunists discussed here from an (even more) conspiracy-fixated, nativist wing who followed the likes of Gerald Smith and Robert Williams. While, in some cases, it seemed only a willingness to verbalize bigoted sentiments separated these two hard-right factions, there were also some fundamental differences in philosophy. In its defence of the popular anti-Semitic screed *The Iron Curtain Over America*, a group called the Mojave Desert Anti-Subversive Committee produced a mimeograph attacking ultra-conservative economist V. Orval Watts, who had criticized the text in *Faith and Freedom*. Watts had argued that, rather an alien conspiracy, communist infiltration within the United States was partly an American disease, borne out of the rampant fiscal progressivism of the New Deal era. This was heresy, the Mojave activists claimed: Marxism was a foreign, Jewish malady, to suggest otherwise was “absurd” and unpatriotic.³⁰⁰

In general though, the basic patterns of ideology — small government economic libertarianism; patriotic loyalty that bordered on the authoritarian; Christian, family-centric social values — suggest a consistent, conservative vision behind community counter-subversion. While the liberal *New American Right* scholars of the mid-1950s saw popular anticommunism in terms of a lumpen, reactionary, ill-educated mass, whose hero worship of Joseph McCarthy was for an outsider figure destroying hated democratic institutions from within, this thesis makes clear that the most significant grassroots actions of the early Cold War were

³⁰⁰ “Mojave Desert Anti-Subversive Committee”, Folder 2, Box 1, Right-Wing Pamphlets.

carried out by relatively sophisticated activists. Theirs was a coherent political philosophy, largely consistent with the right-wing of Republicanism.

This raises the question of whether this anticommunism should even be considered a grassroots phenomenon at all. In the purest sense, perhaps not — while activists and ideologues carefully constructed a narrative of “average Americans” responding to visceral threats to a traditional way of life, in fact there was little truly spontaneous and reactive about the activism they undertook. Even the most impulsive, mob-dominated response — the Peekskill riots — was inspired by civic institutions and media voices that embraced a holistic, political view of the red issue. The Minute Women, on one level archetypal political outsiders, were founded and led by an educated elite. An aristocratic artist and a wealthy industrialist, both with private political ambitions, created the organization, with support from experienced Republican activists. Stevenson, Kellems and their cohorts were fresh, dynamic voices within post-war American conservatism, but they were hardly the artless, all-American housewives of the group’s manufactured image. The school board activists of Pasadena and Los Angeles too, despite the ultra-local focus of their endeavours, were led by politically educated and socially privileged figures like senator’s daughter Louise Padelford. Anticommunist campaigners routinely attacked the moderate Republican establishment, but they effectively fought on the side of another entrenched power base: the pro-business economic right represented by influential lobbying groups like the US Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturers.

Not quite “kitchen table activists”, then, but neither were they representatives of the political status quo masquerading as voices of the people — the “astroturfers” of contemporary parlance. They may have echoed the Cold War nationalism and anti-radicalism that permeated mainstream politics but their interpretation of what unorthodoxies might be considered un-American was far more restrictive than even the most stringent establishment-endorsed version. Their wider social goals, too, represented a hard-right challenge to the centrist consensus. Community anticommunism also gave voice to previously marginal constituencies. Conservative women, in particular, became more visible thanks to groups like the Minute Women and the Freedom Clubs; at once subverting and reinforcing traditional gender values, through dynamic, aggressive campaigns for anti-progressive goals.

For the most part, community anticommunists pursued logical and self-interested agendas. Their fears of Soviet infiltration may have been misplaced, and their anti-UN conspiracy theories outlandish, but many other positions — on schools, taxation, morals, free speech — spoke directly to fairly unremarkable concerns for a group of middle-class, civically engaged, white, Christian conservatives in post-war America. They attacked liberal educational standards that were promoting “softness” in the youth; movies that featured morally suspect performers and expounded unpatriotic ideas; UN-backed civic programmes that advocated progressive ideas of social responsibility and global citizenship. In this they responded as much to a society that was experiencing the early stages of a sexual, racial and cultural revolution, as they did one that was faced by an existential geopolitical threat.

The most productive goal of grassroots anticommunists, and by extension the institutional conservative forces that backed them, was not in hunting reds, but harnessing Cold War fears and the instinctive national pride of the thriving civic scene and repurposing it for ideological right-wing ends. Activists like the Minute Women, Pasadena's SDC, and Los Angeles' anti-UNESCO campaigners brought complex, ultra-conservative politics right into the heart of the suburban and small-town American experience. The American Legion and VFW used their position as pillars of civic life to endorse a highly politicized form of loyalty and patriotism: authoritarian, nativist, illiberal in its practice. The activities of the Freedom Clubs helped to politicize American religious life in new and ever more aggressively conservative ways. Often it was not even a case of convincing the majority of any community to sign up for right-wing positions on policing education or free speech, but simply making previously normative behaviour "controversial". In this way, otherwise unaffiliated citizens could be persuaded to acquiesce to "compromise" positions that in fact shifted the balance of power rightwards.

As the national red scare served to neuter trade unions as forums for left-wing community organizing, so anticommunists were working to create new potent forums for conservative grassroots activism — a legacy that went far beyond the immediate political tussles of the early Cold War. Grassroots counter-subversives clearly also made life hard for left-wingers in a direct sense, though such was the demoralizing repression already suffered by American radicals, the potential for damaging impact was limited. More frequently, they tormented

liberals — socially reforming clergy, modernising educators, pro-UN internationalists and the like. Liberals, in turn, reacted with rage, fear, contempt, and mockery towards these uncouth, undemocratic “super patriots”. Despite the injuries they suffered, progressives were not always unwilling participants in the fight — and often politicized the community sphere as readily as the anticommunists. For instance, one of the most seemingly bizarre platforms of the broader red hunting movement was the belief that the burgeoning field of mental health care was, in fact, a conspiracy to ship right-wing undesirables off to Soviet-style gulags. Ignoring the irony of these authoritarian conservatives lamenting perceived thought policing, and accepting the sheer improbability of their paranoia, they had a point. Richard Rovere’s perception of the Minute Women and others as “zanies, zombies and compulsive haters” was not atypical of liberal responses to the conservative fringe; some really did think, naively it would turn out, that reactionary tendencies were a psychological ailment that could be gradually inoculated out of American society. Such condescension served only to enrage and inspire anticommunist activists. Red scare liberals, in their often-contemptuous attitude towards their conservative antagonists, failed to take seriously the potency of this nascent new right.

Certainly, at the time, it did not seem as if community anticommunism offered anything other than isolated pockets of resistance to the liberal order. Its impact on the national political scene was slim. Joseph McCarthy never effectively mobilized a large-scale support base. General Douglas MacArthur, seen by many as the next best hope for a transformative conservative figure, resisted the activists’ urges to throw his hat into the political ring. Attempts from the

grassroots to facilitate outsider challenges to the two-party status quo — such as Vivien Kellems' congress runs and the Freedom Clubs and Minute Women-backed Constitution Party — generated significant publicity but minimal public interest.

The lack of a breakthrough was the result of a combination of factors. The strength of the post-war moderate consensus and the marginality of the community counter-subversives certainly limited their potential to influence mainstream politics; at the same time, the conservative wing of the GOP may have failed to fully appreciate the potential for effective community engagement, especially in areas like Southern California. Rightist Republicans like William Knowland courted grassroots anticommunists with speeches and public appearances, and these efforts no doubt paid off in donations and ballot papers, but it was a piecemeal, top down approach rather than true local-level mobilization.

Eisenhower's second presidential election victory in 1956, achieved in emphatic style, demonstrated the strength of the Republican renaissance during the early Cold War, but conversely the widespread appeal of this moderate right-winger highlighted the seeming improbability of a populist conservative takeover of the GOP — the Korean War was a memory, the economy was booming, the red scare had quietened to a faint fringe murmur. This stability was not to last.

The grassroots anticommunists of the late forties and early fifties might not have shaped their own era in any truly dramatic manner, but they provided a bridge

— both symbolic and practical — between the old right and new. In 1954, Suzanne Silvercruys Stevenson — the product of old European money and the traditional GOP heartlands of wealthy Connecticut, matriarch of a grassroots female-led anticommunist movement that began on the North East coast and achieved its greatest coups in the sunbelt cities of the South and West — began work on a great sculpture of a politician she hoped would lead conservatives to ultimate victory. The twice life-sized tribute was abandoned — the sitter having cancelled the project, “too modest” to see it through to completion — only to be resurrected as a eulogy, after Senator McCarthy’s death, just three years later. In 1962, she began work on a likeness of another flawed hero of the grassroots right, albeit one who garnered significantly more in the way of meaningful populist backing: Arizona senator and presidential candidate Barry Goldwater. When Reverend James Fifiield moved to Los Angeles in 1935 he used the self-evident connection between Christian values and laissez-faire capitalism to attack the New Deal from the pulpit. Fifteen years later, he had expanded his ministry into a mini-empire of right-wing religious organizing thanks, in no small part, to the community forums he provided to the red scare’s leading voices. By the end of the decade, his brand of non-doctrinaire religiosity had fallen out of favour amid the rising tide of evangelism, but his libertarian, conspiracist politics had found a vibrant new venue: the John Birch Society.³⁰¹

What did it mean to be an American, at the mid-point of the twentieth century, as one global conflict gave way to another, and prosperity unimaginable little more than a decade before brought with it great social and cultural change? For many,

³⁰¹ *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 3 May 1959, p.5.

if only in some vague and unspoken way, it meant not being un-American. For a resolute few, it meant identifying and exposing un-Americanism in others. These amateur anticommunists, community counter-subversives, self-appointed enforcers of correct cultural practice, were derided in their own time and have been overlooked historically, but they left a genuine legacy. Their actions were often petty, cruel and vindictive; their conspiracy theories absurd, by any reasonable analysis. Yet their methods were often surprisingly effective: they translated concrete concerns of a sub-section of American society into a dramatic narrative of good versus evil, patriot versus traitor, freedom versus slavery. In doing so they repackaged the national politics of privilege for a more broad, popular setting. Grassroots anticommunists never formed a mass movement, but they represented an embryonic, multi-issue network that contributed in a small but significant way to the development of a powerful conservative base. They redrew battlegrounds and placed right-wing politics at the centre of the American community; they challenged the definition of patriotism in a way that echoes across the latter half of the American century and beyond.

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